The New Criterion

April 1992

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1

Robert Venturi does Seattle *by Roger Kimball*, 4

Letters of Dorothy Richardson *selected, with an introduction, by Gloria G. Fromm*, 10

Edna St. Vincent Millay *by Mary Jo Salter*, 23

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle *by Renee Winegarten*, 30

New poems *by Louis Simpson, John Hollander & Harvey Shapiro*, 38

Music: Egon Petri *by Samuel Lipman*, 45; **Photography:** Gay Block's "Rescuers" *by Jed Perl*, 52; **Theater:** Gershwin & more *by Donald Lyons*, 56 **Books:** *Ann Charters, editor* The portable Beat reader *reviewed by Bruce Bawer*, 60; *O. K. Werckmeister* Citadel culture *reviewed by Wayne Dynes*, 66; *Hans Mommsen* From Weimar to Auschwitz *reviewed by Harold James*, 68; *Harold Fromm* Academic capitalism & literary value *reviewed by William Rice*, 73; **Shorter notices** *by James W. Tuttleton & Tess Lewis*, 74; **Notebook:** Carlos Fuentes discovers America *by Mark Falcoff*, 77

Volume 10, Number 8, $4.75

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michael Steiner

Sculpture

April 2 to 28

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York, NY 10021

Tel (212) 879-6606 Fax (212) 744-0655

Monday - Saturday 9:30 to 5:30

May 21 to June 27

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

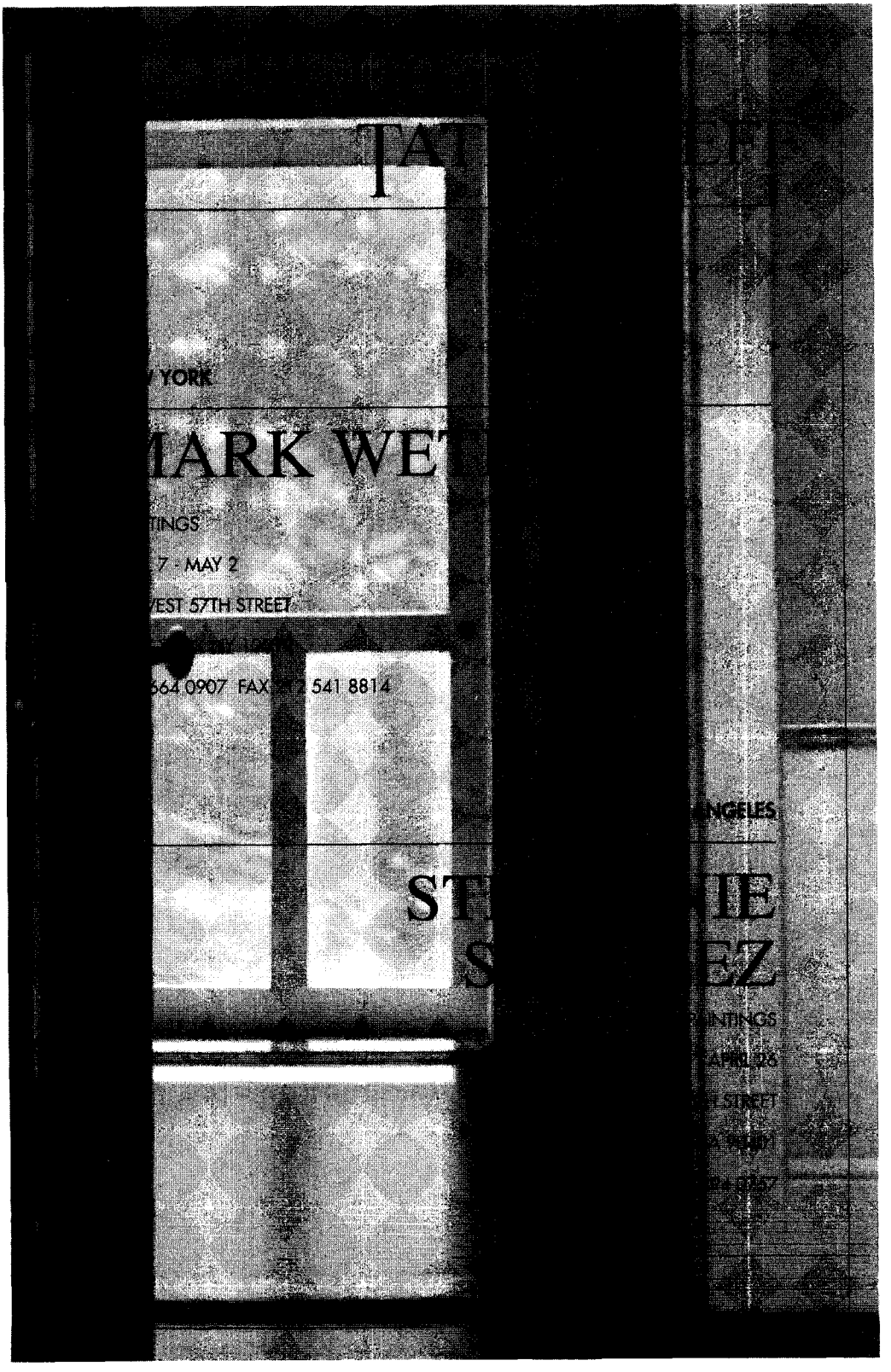
Kurfürstendamm 214 D-1000 Berlin 15

Tel (30) 885-4251 Fax (30) 885-4252

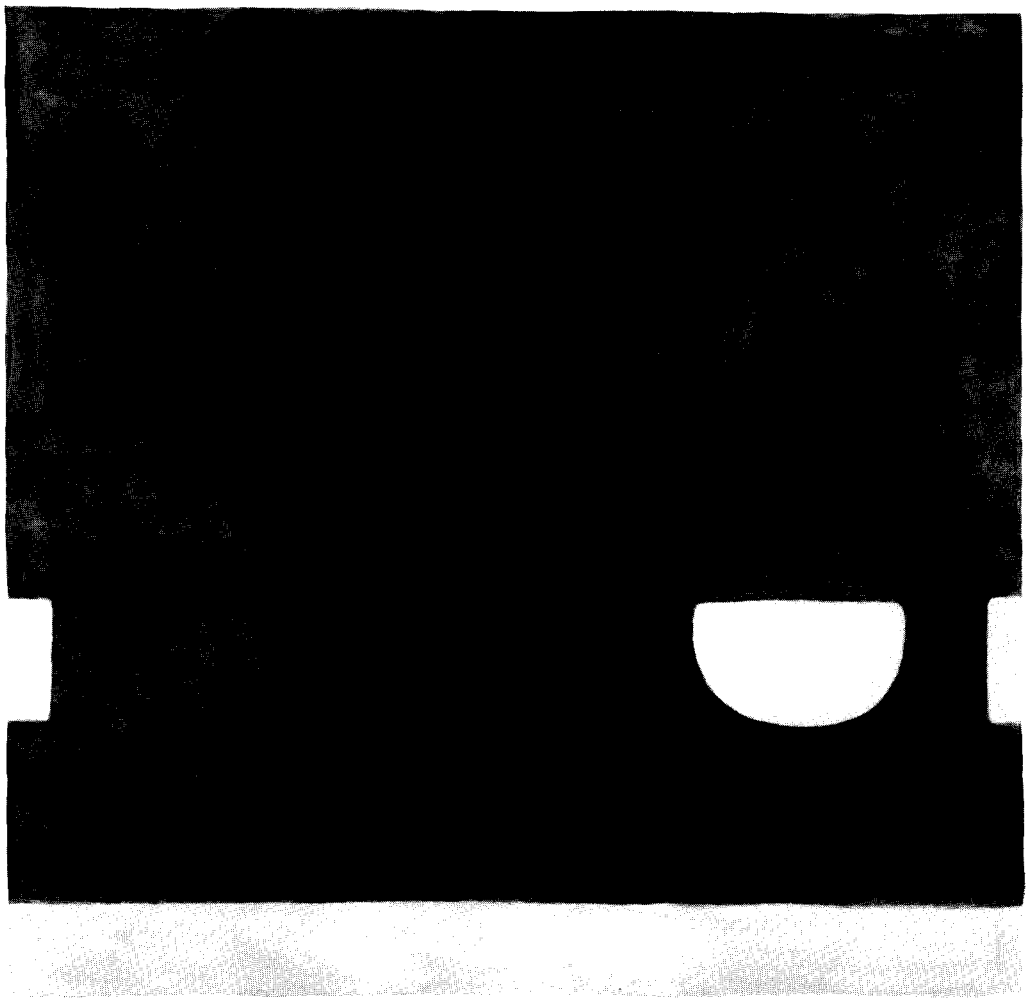
Dienstag - Samstag 10 bis 18 Uhr

Michael Steiner is exclusively represented by the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Still Life with Black Theme, 1975. Oil on canvas, 66 x 68 in. (168 x 173 cm)

W I L L I A M S C O T T

The Estate of William Scott (1913-1989) is now represented in the United States by the André Emmerich Gallery, 41 E. 57th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022. Tel: (212) 752-0124 Fax: (212) 371-7345. The first exhibiton of his paintings and gouaches in almost a decade will be on view from April 1-25. A color catalogue is available from the gallery at twelve dollars postpaid.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *April 1992*

Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Managing Editor *Christopher Carduff*
Office Manager *Marjorie Danser*

Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer is the author of *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern American Novel and Its Critics* (Graywolf Press).

Wayne Dynes is a professor of art history at Hunter College.

Mark Falcoff is Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

Gloria G. Fromm is the author of *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (University of Illinois Press) and the editor of *Windows on Modernism*, a forthcoming collection of Richardson's letters.

John Hollander's most recent book is an expanded edition of *Types of Shape* (Yale University Press).

Harold James is a professor of history at Princeton University and the author of *A German Identity: 1770-1990* (Routledge).

Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals*, is now available in paperback from HarperPerennial.

Tess Lewis is a translator and book reviewer living in New York City.

Samuel Lipman's new collection of criticism, *Music and More*, will be published in June by Northwestern University Press.

Donald Lyons is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion*.

Jed Perl's most recent book is *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

William Rice has written for *The Southern Review* and other publications.

Mary Jo Salter is the author of two books of poetry, *Henry Purcell in Japan* and *Unfinished Painting*, published by Knopf.

Harvey Shapiro's latest book is *National Cold Storage Company: New & Selected Poems* (Wesleyan).

Louis Simpson's most recent collection of poems is *In the Room We Share* (Paragon House).

James W. Tuttleton is a professor of English literature at New York University.

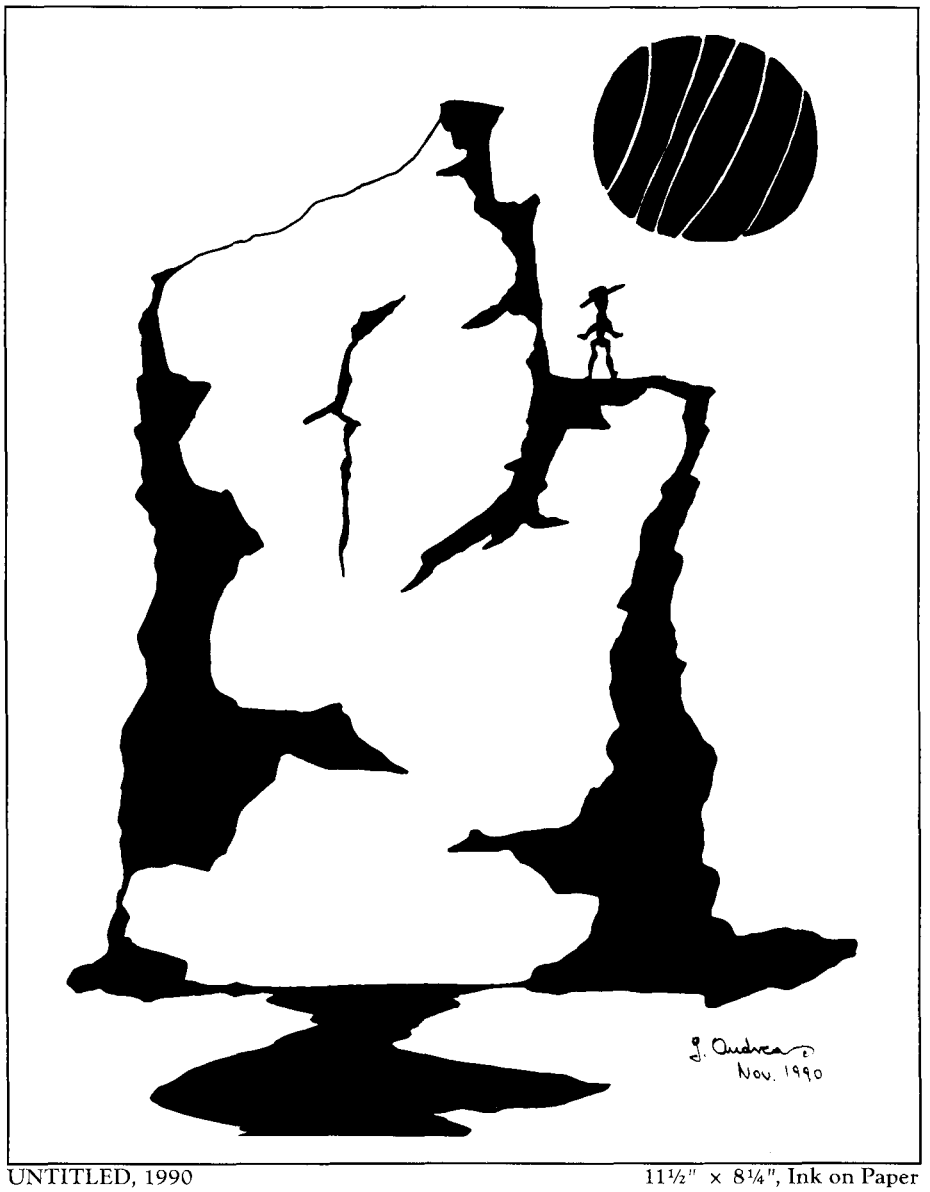
Renee Winegarten wrote a Letter from Paris for our June 1991 issue.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. April 1992, Volume 10, Number 8. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Copyright © 1992 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising representative: Kate Shanley, 799 Broadway, Room 226, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4905.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set with the Flexicon Composer from Emerging Technology and is printed by Science Press of Ephrata, Pennsylvania.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



UNTITLED, 1990 — 11½" × 8¼", Ink on Paper

GEORGE ANDREAS

Paintings & Drawings

8545 LEESBURG PIKE (Rte. 7)
VIENNA, VIRGINIA 22182
703-448-2222 FAX 703-356-3328

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: April 1992

The mess at the NEA

It is unfortunate that for the first time since its creation in 1965 the National Endowment for the Arts has become an issue in a presidential political campaign, and it is another sign of the disarray that has overtaken this federal agency that this has been allowed to happen. Yet given the inattention and inaction of the Bush administration in all matters pertaining to the conduct of the NEA during the stormy three-year tenure of its own chairman, it was all but inevitable that the most notorious of the agency's grant-making decisions would sooner or later be drawn into the campaign maelstrom. After all, those dubious grants were already the subject of acrimonious debate in Congress, in the press, and in public forums throughout the nation, and there was never any reason to believe that the controversy generated by those grants was likely to diminish as a general election loomed—especially with the activities of the NEA still so ineptly directed by a chairman who, astonishingly, seemed to know even less about politics than he did about the arts.

We know of no one who regrets the departure of John E. Frohnmayer from the chairmanship of the Endowment, yet his resignation leaves the outstanding problems of the agency with no visible solutions in sight. Such solutions can only be formulated and acted upon within the framework of an intelligent and comprehensive policy on federal arts funding, and that is something that the Bush administration, despite mounting provocation and fierce contention, has refused to address during its first term in office. Now, under the worst possible conditions, it will be obliged to do so, for the NEA is not going to disappear as a divisive issue after Patrick Buchanan's departure from the campaign trail for other political venues.

It should be recalled, in this connection, that two years ago an excellent opportunity to reform the NEA with bipartisan support was unaccountably botched. Responding to the first wave of criticism and uproar over the Mapplethorpe and Serrano imbroglios, the White House and the Congress joined in appointing a special commission to look into the policies, programs, and procedures of the Endowment and recommend whatever reforms were thought to be necessary. The chairmen of this commission—John Brademas, then president of New York University and a former Democratic congressman from Indiana, and Leonard Garment, the well-known Washington attorney who had been the White House advisor on arts policy in the Nixon administration—were both well-versed in the NEA's operations and generally regarded as "friends" of the agency. The bipartisan commission which

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they headed could not therefore be regarded by anyone but the Endowment's most uncritical supporters as ideologically hostile to federal arts funding or to the agency itself.

Yet the report that finally resulted from the inquiries of the Brademas-Garment commission (as it came to be called) contained some devastating criticisms of the NEA's operations. It also contained some sound recommendations for the agency's reform. On two matters in particular the commission report was very pointed. It found the peer-panel system—the committees appointed by the NEA to pass judgment on grant applications—to be riddled with conflicts of interest, and thus in urgent need of sweeping revision. It also found that, more often than not, the Endowment had lost sight of the fact that it was accountable to the American people as a whole and not merely to the agency's beneficiaries in the so-called arts community.

There was even a suggestion that this facile notion of an "arts community" had been too narrowly understood, thus making the Endowment hostage to special interests. In reality, of course, the life of the arts in this country is made up of a great many different groups, individuals, institutions, and audiences that are by no means in perfect agreement about what the arts should be doing or about what the NEA should be doing, and it was one of the conclusions of the Brademas-Garment commission report that on this matter, too, the Endowment was in urgent need of a revised outlook. Most generally stated, the report sought to recall the NEA to the fundamental fact that it was an agency of government and not a lobbying or activist organization for special interests.

Although far from perfect in every respect, the commission's report offered Washington a sound and responsible basis on which to begin to consider necessary reforms in the NEA's funding operations. Yet, like so many other government commission reports, this one was quickly consigned to oblivion. It turned out that no one in Congress, in the White House, or at the NEA was the least bit interested in reform. And so the Endowment was left to stagger on, moving inexorably from one scandal to another, until it ended up as an issue in the presidential campaign.

Now it seems unlikely that a new chairman for the Endowment will be confirmed by the Senate before the November elections even if the Bush administration could find a nominee willing and able to face the gladiatorial combat that a Senate committee hearing would inevitably entail in the current political atmosphere. Yet this does not mean that some clear and concrete policy decisions about federal arts funding in general and the NEA in particular can be deferred any longer. The mess at the NEA is only going to get worse if the issues that have afflicted the Endowment are not boldly and directly addressed.

A good place to start is with that reminder from the Brademas-Garment commission report that any federal arts-funding program must be understood to be accountable to the American people as a whole. The NEA must be made to abandon its self-appointed role as a lobbying agency for special-interest groups—and most especially for radical-fringe groups—in the arts. It probably should get out of the business of passing judgment on new art altogether. It was never a terrific idea for an agency of the federal government to get involved in the very difficult task of deciding which new art—and which new art forms—should be supported with public money and which should not. In a field where even the so-called experts are not only deeply divided in their judgment but also often compromised by their own special interests and profes-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sional affiliations, no government bureaucracy will ever be capable of making sound decisions. For the NEA to continue to pretend to do so will only expose the agency to a continued barrage of hostile attacks from every political and cultural quarter. Decisions about new art are best left to our diverse and highly pluralistic private sector, which is where the real judgments of posterity are made. There is in any case something absurd about the goverment acting as a kind of licensing agency for social rebellion masquesrading as artistic innovation. The practice of supporting licensed rebels is already a growth industry in the museums and the universities that needs no help from the NEA.

What the NEA is best equipped to do is to serve as a support for the great models of art and the great institutions of art that have come down to us from history. This, in fact, is what the business of the Endowment has been mainly about, and the principal reason for its creation in the first place—to help give the American people access to the greatest artistic achievements of our civilization. There are undoubtedly cogent arguments to be made about which achievements of the past qualify for that exalted status and which do not, but those are arguments which scholars, connoisseurs, and artists should be left to settle for themselves. It would, of course, change the nature of the NEA if this withdrawal from the arena of new art were to take place; it would make it, yes, more conservative. But that is the kind of change that now seems warranted if the agency is to survive as anything but a source of friction in our society—indeed, if it is to survive at all.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Elitist anti-elitism: Robert Venturi does Seattle

by Roger Kimball

The point should be: is it good architecture?
—Robert Venturi

Public-spiritedness and civic pride are virtues not conspicuously evident in many American towns and cities these days. Cynicism, incompetence, and corruption among public officials; apathy and brittle self-centeredness among business leaders and ordinary citizens; violence, anomie, and despair among the poor: this is the litany we hear repeated over and over again in the papers and news reports and that we can witness for ourselves every day on the streets. To be sure, many municipalities have embarked on public-relations campaigns to attract taxpayers and tourists. But how many cities live up to their advertisements? Optimistic city dwellers will recall a handful of episodes when public-spiritedness triumphed over apathy, when some of their fellow citizens banded together for reasons larger than their own gratification or aggrandizement. But for most of us such episodes are the exception rather than the rule: they stand out vividly precisely because they are so rare.

Not that this state of affairs is wholly bad. Corrupt and incompetent public officials are indeed unsavory and oughtn't to be countenanced—although one may perhaps be forgiven for concluding that they, like the poor, will be always with us. Yet because the desire for community typically competes with the imperatives of freedom, it is hardly surprising that individuals should regard the impersonal workings of bureaucracy most benignantly when they are least demanding and intrusive. Especially in a modern urban environment, the call for community—when it is more than simply rhetoric—is often an alibi for imposing upon individual discretion.

Nevertheless, it is difficult not to be impressed by genuine examples of public-spiritedness and civic pride when they do occur. Anyone who has visited Seattle, Washington, in recent years will know that the city is a veritable bastion of such virtues. Seattlites, as they are wont to call themselves, exhibit an unflinching exuberance about their city and its amenities. And, clearly, their enthusiasm is contagious, for Seattle has enjoyed enormous growth over the last decade. Even in the midst of the current economic recession, the city seems vibrant and prosperous, its mood determinedly optimistic. I can't remember a place where the hotel porters are so unremittingly friendly.

Given the peculiar place that art has come to occupy in our society—having become in many circles more a patent of social achievement and token of political broad-mindedness than an object of aesthetic pleasure—it was only to be expected that Seattlites would bring unusual dedication and energy to the task of supplying their city with a new art museum. And so they have. Nearly half of the $62 million needed for the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

project in downtown Seattle was raised by floating a public bond: "the largest successful public referendum for an art museum in the U.S.," as a press release proudly informs us.

Nor was it surprising that Seattle should have chosen the celebrated Philadelphia-based architect Robert Venturi (in collaboration with the local firm of Olson Sundberg) to design its museum. The gentle postmodernist and winner of the prestigious Pritzker Prize could be counted on to imbue a new museum with the requisite measure of brand-name aura. Moreover, the firm of Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates has rather specialized in providing a pleasing rhetoric of civic-mindedness to accompany their urban buildings. Although Mr. Venturi and his wife, Denise Scott Brown, claim to have found inspiration in such monuments of architectural excellence and civic responsibility as the Las Vegas strip and Pop Art, they have expended considerable energy writing and talking about the importance of "context," sensitive urban planning, and community.

Mr. Venturi's important discovery was that by supplying his buildings with a script, he needn't worry so much about the architecture itself. When the late Gordon Bunshaft decried one of Mr. Venturi's early projects as "ugly and ordinary," it was the work of a moment to turn the tables and declare that Bunshaft's dismissive epithet was really a "compliment." How much better—or at least more interesting—Mr. Venturi reasoned in *Learning from Las Vegas*, to be ugly and ordinary than "heroic and original" like all those elitist modernists of yore.

Consider the main entrance façade of the new Seattle Art Museum. It curves unexpectedly as it trundles down University Street to meet First Avenue, dipping suddenly inward again in a little dimple before petering out blandly a few yards later toward Union Street. The uninitiated observer might think that the way Mr. Venturi shaved off the corner, displacing the entrance from the grand stairway that leads up into the museum, was merely a clumsy attempt to give an otherwise drab structure a distinctive profile. In this age of postmodernist quirkiness, one might in fact conclude that Mr. Venturi's solution was merely ugly and ordinary. But the uninitiated observer would have spoken without the benefit of Mr. Venturi's filigree of commentary about inside meeting outside, his explanation that the building is "a civic work of art that does not upstage the art inside . . . at home in its context, at ease in the ethos of its place," &c. This is sheer flapdoodle. But it is precisely what public-spirited clients, wanting to do the right thing but unsure of themselves, want to hear.

Has Mr. Venturi succeeded in Seattle? The answer has to be both Yes and No. Yes, doubtless, insofar as one looks at the Seattle Art Museum as an exercise in civic piety. For Mr. Venturi would certainly seem to have succeeded in designing a spot that the public, or part of it, likes to visit. On opening day, one hears, hundreds of people stood in the legendary Seattle rain for hours to catch a glimpse of the inside of their new museum. During my three-day visit, the museum's café often had long lines of people waiting for a cup of cappuccino or other up-to-date sustenance, and the bookstore seemed always to be doing a brisk business. The galleries were far more sparsely populated, though perhaps that had something to do with the fact that several had only just opened.

In any event, Mr. Venturi would also seem to have succeeded in his oft-announced ambition of creating a place that was "likeable to children." The compact, five-story building, sited on a steeply sloping hill just a block or two from the waterfront and the famous Pike Place Market, is clad mostly in limestone panels. On the side facing University Street, the panels are decorated with stylized fluting. Up about the fourth story are incised, frieze-like, fourteen-foot letters spelling out SEATTLE ART MUSEUM—the world's largest incised architectural letters, Miss Scott Brown hazarded, and no doubt perfect for those

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just learning to read. Also for children is the mélange of parti-colored granites, marbles, and terra-cottas decorating the façade at ground level. Vaguely reminiscent of the circus (though Mr. Venturi spoke of African and Pacific Northwest art, which feature prominently in Seattle's collection), these festoon a variety of whimsical arches and columns framing over-sized window bays that divide the grand stairway inside the building from the pedestrian staircase echoing it outside. Here, too, the effect is neo-Romper Room.

In a recent interview, Mr. Venturi took issue with the heavily "theoretical" direction that much academic architecture has taken in recent years (partly, perhaps largely, under the influence of his 1966 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, but we may leave that to one side). "The point should be," he declared: "is it good architecture?"[1] Well, is it? As has been frequently noted, many of the distinguishing architectural elements of the Seattle Art Museum are similar to Mr. Venturi's recently completed Sainsbury Wing for the National Gallery in London. (The Seattle design was in fact conceived first, but the Sainsbury Wing was executed far more lavishly.) The use of limestone paneling, the hypertrophied lettering incised in a freize spelling out the name of the institution, the idiosyncratic corners, even such details as painted aluminum columns topped with vaguely Egyptoid decoration: both museums have them in common. As it happens, some columns in the Seattle Art Museum are virtually identical to those used in the Sainsbury Wing: It cuts down on the cost, Mr. Venturi explained, to repeat such ideas. In fact, much that one might say about the Sainsbury Wing can be repeated, *mutatis mutandis*, about the Seattle Art Museum.[2] Both museums contain some fine exhibition galleries. In Seattle, the suites of smaller galleries on the south side of the building reserved for Asian art (on the third floor) and older European art (on the fourth floor) are far more successful that the large bays on the north side of the building where African, Native American, and twentieth-century art is exhibited.

In both museums, the greatest interior disaster is also the most pretentious architectural "statement": the grand stairway. In both, the stairway boasts a series of brightly colored arches (for the kids?) that are perched like a papier-mâché canopy in glorious uselessness above the stairs; both stairways rise at the edge of the building, alongside a series of large windows, in order to make them seem separate from the building proper; both are strangely—perhaps even deliberately—ill-proportioned; and both are set obliquely to the right of the main entrance, disrupting the natural circulation of the building. In Seattle, the stairway cannot even be said to go anywhere, since when one climbs to the top, one finds oneself not in a gallery but on a landing directly in front of the building's rear entrance: So long, and thanks for coming. In Seattle, too, someone had the ghastly idea of distributing half-a-dozen large Chinese stone sculptures up the stairway. Together with the arches, the ensemble looks, as one wit put it, like nothing so much as the entrance to a certain species of Chinese restaurant.

The point should be: is it good architecture? The tradition that Mr. Venturi repudiates held that "God is in the details." There is a problem with details at his new museum. As everyone knows, it rains a good deal in Seattle. One might therefore expect an architect to take extra pains to assure that drainage was adequate. When I first arrived at the main entrance of the Seattle Art

1 "Complexity and Contradiction Twenty-five Years Later: An Interview with Robert Venturi," conducted by Stuart Wrede, in *American Art of the 1960s*, Studies in Modern Art, vol. 1, edited by John Elderfield (The Museum of Modern Art, 1992).

2 See my discussion of the Sainsbury Wing in "Clipper-Class Classicism: Robert Venturi's London Adventure," *The New Criterion*, December 1991, pages 42-45.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Museum, it was raining lightly. Collected in the little plaza in front of the entrance was an inch or two of rain water. What happens when it really starts raining? In addition, on the third and fourth stories there are large bay windows set into the dimple that rises the height of the building. The windows overlook Eliot Bay, just off Puget Sound. It is a dramatic sight—or it would be if only one could see it properly. One of the mullions, about four inches wide, is set just at the eye level of the average adult. Mr. Venturi is about my height, so he too must have occasionally gazed out upon his mullion. Perhaps the children that he hopes to entertain can get a good view of the prospect beyond.

In architectural terms, anyway, the Seattle Art Museum is not much of a success. But Mr. Venturi has succeeded grandly in his ambition to create a museum that is not "elitist," that champions the idea of "art as part of everyday life." The original Seattle Art Museum, an Art Deco structure cloistered far from the city center in the bucolic acres of Volunteer Park, was built in the early Thirties by Dr. Richard E. Fuller primarily to exhibit his superlative collection of Asian art (a collection that, incidentally, was greatly enhanced by Sherman Lee, for many years the distinguished director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, when he came to work at the Seattle Art Museum in the late 1940s). This period building is being restored and will reopen as a center for the study of Asian Art under the aegis of the new museum. As Mr. Venturi noted in some public remarks, the Volunteer Park building conformed to the traditional conception of the museum as a pavilioned gallery set apart from the hubbub of daily life.

He did not pursue the idea except to brand it "elitist," but it is perhaps worth noting that this conception of the museum is patterned on the idea of the museum as a temple of art: as a repository of objects that are rare, precious, demanding. Whatever its architectural vocabulary, the museum in this sense looks back in spirit to such lofty structures as Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin. It does not attempt to meet people on the level of their everyday experience, seducing them inside with quiche, cappuccino, and the latest art-world trend. Instead, it offers them a mode of experience that is patently different from—and perhaps more exalted than—their experience of everyday life.

The Seattle Art Museum, Mr. Venturi noted, stands at the opposite end of the spectrum. Its model is not the pavilioned gallery set apart from the demos, but what he referred to as "the traditional loft building." Early models for this vision of the museum include Philip Goodwin and Edwin Durell Stone's 1939 building for the Museum of Modern Art in midtown Manhattan. Far from being segregated from the daily life of the city, the museum in this sense is an extension of daily life. It exists, as the architectural historian William H. Jordy observed in these pages some years ago, "with a revolving door on the street and an enlarged view of what a museum . . . should encompass."[3] Perhaps, as Mr. Venturi put it, this anti-elitist conception of the function of the art museum is "a very beautiful idea." There can be little doubt, at any rate, that it is an idea whose time has come. Mr. Venturi estimated that in an old-fashioned "elitist" museum, nearly 90 percent of the building was given over to exhibiting art. Today, he said, the total is closer to 30 percent. The rest is largely given over to what are euphemistically termed amenities: bookstores, gift shops, restaurants, members' lounges, &c.; that is, income-producing enterprises to supplement the museum's budget. If the Goodwin-Stone building for MOMA brought the museum down off its pedestal, subsequent developments have brought it right out into the street—if not, indeed, even further afield. In the article just cited, William Jordy remarked that this democratizing trend in museum design, epitomized at the time he was writing by Cesar Pelli's ex-

3 "The New Museum," by William H. Jordy, in *The New Criterion* for September 1982, pages 61-65.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pansion of MOMA, then underway, "puts one in mind of certain building arcades, like that at the base of New York's Citicorp building, or of shopping marts like Quincy Market, South Street Seaport, Harbor Place, and Ghirardelli Square."

The new Seattle Art Museum would fit in snugly at South Street Seaport or at most of the other venues that Mr. Jordy mentions. Indeed, given Mr. Venturi's declared ambition of realizing the "beautiful idea" of an anti-elitist museum, it seems appropriate that SAM (after MOMA, acronyms are *de rigueur* for the aspiring art museum) should happen to be located in a part of town conspicuously populated with strip-joints and porno theaters. Almost directly across from the main entrance, for example, is an establishment called the Lusty Lady, which appeared to be doing a far more vigorous business than the museum. It would also appear to be an enthusiastic supporter of the arts. When the museum first opened, "The Lusty Lady Welcomes SAM" is said to have been emblazoned across one side of its marquee, "Expose Yourself to Art" across the other. Perhaps joint memberships could be arranged: visit the Lusty Lady, then stop by the museum for a refreshing beverage. Visit her ten times and get a free poster from the bookshop. The Lusty Lady might also provide an appropriate place for some collaborative efforts: one imagines that Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley, and other "cutting-edge" performance artists would feel right at home there. Mr. Venturi spoke a good deal about the prominent role that education plays in the modern, anti-elitist museum. No wonder he professed himself pleased by the proximity of the Lusty Lady.

Behind—but not so far behind—Mr. Venturi's ideology of anti-elitism is a political agenda. The name of that agenda is multiculturalism, and the "arts community" in Seattle—as in so many other places—has fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. The unacknowledged truth about Seattle's collection is it is mostly second-rate or worse. Apart from its holdings in Asian art, which are reputedly among the best in the country, it has little of lasting merit. Its twentieth-century collection, with few exceptions, is an inventory of fleeting trends. Its holdings in nineteenth-century European art are mostly shallow and undistinguished, as are many of its holdings in the Old Masters. The museum has made much of its collection of African and Native American art, but only a commitment to the imperatives of multiculturalism could persuade one to take most of these objects very seriously as *art*. It was cheerfully pointed out to me that the museum owns the hatchet or club or tomahawk with which Captain Cook was dispatched lo these many ago. This of course is splendid. But it highlights one of chief problems facing the Seattle Art Museum. The objects of which it is proudest are chiefly of anthropological, as distinct from artistic, interest. A commitment to multiculturalism requires that this be denied, and it is denied in the easiest possible way: by dispensing with the very idea that there are important distinctions to be made between aesthetic achievement and anthropological curiosity. As Mr. Venturi put it recently, "our whole ethos must be tolerant and inclusive." In other words: who says that a painting by Titian is of greater aesthetic merit than that tomahawk?

In Seattle, the governing ideology of multiculturalism seems mostly low-key and implicit, though its effects are everywhere patent in Mr. Venturi's new museum. Seattle's commitment to multiculturalism has not been lost on bien-pensant journalists, however, many of whom have loudly trumpeted its virtues to the world. In a recent issue of *New York* magazine, for example, Kay Larson, long a reliable compendium of politically correct opinions about cultural matters, delivered herself of a fawning article in praise of Seattle's "internationalist" accomplishment. There are "no standard European histories here," Miss Larson purred.

> The masterpiece mentality itself is held up to scrutiny and regarded with some suspicion.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> The postmodern ideal is a museum based not on "hero" objects but on a collaborative level of quality in which things work together because none screams its moral superiority.

"The masterpiece mentality," "hero objects": this little gem of multiculturalist sermonizing has it all, even the requisite dollop of what we might call postmodern unintelligibility. What, after all, can be meant by "a collaborative level of quality"? What except a thoroughgoing confusion that denies the idea of quality altogether. It is also typical of the reigning multiculturalist fashion that Miss Larson should speak of objects screaming their "moral superiority" when the superiority in question is not moral but aesthetic. Yet this is precisely the distinction—between morality and aesthetics—that our politically correct multiculturalists have blurred in their eagerness to subjugate culture to ideology.

It may go without saying that the vision of an anti-elitist museum to which Mr. Venturi, Miss Larson, and many others subscribe today could not be pursued without a powerful spark of self-righteousness. This is evident throughout the rhetoric surrounding multicultural endeavors such as the new Seattle Art Museum. But it is perhaps nowhere more blatant than in the endless talk one hears about the "educational" and didactic function of the "new" museum. It is gleefully pointed out that there are more "resource centers" and computer-imaging systems, more publications and symposia in the new musuem than in their stuffy counterparts of old. There are endless tours for schoolchildren and lectures for adults. Is this not a marvelous thing, bringing ever more art, in an ever more entertaining fashion, to ever more people? A moment's thought tells us that what is being offered to the public in the guise of an educational resource is really a kind of deception of the public. What they are getting is not culture but a bill of goods. The philosopher Hannah Arendt saw this with exceptional clarity. "What is at stake here," she wrote in "The Crisis in Culture,"

> is the objective status of the cultural world, which, insofar as it contains tangible things—books and paintings, statues, buildings, and music—comprehends, and gives testimony to, the entire recorded past of countries, nations, and ultimately mankind. As such, the only nonsocial and authentic criterion for judging these specifically cultural things is their relative permanence and even eventual immortality. Only what will last through the centuries can ultimately claim to be a cultural object. The point of the matter is that, as soon as the immortal works of the past became the object of social and individual refinement and the status accorded to it, they lost their most important and elemental quality, which is to grasp and move the reader or the spectator over the centuries. . . . The result of this is not disintegration but decay, and those who promote it are not the Tin Pan Alley composers but a special kind of intellectual, often well read and well informed, whose sole function is to organize, disseminate, and change cultural objects in order to persuade the masses that *Hamlet* can be as entertaining as *My Fair Lady,* and perhaps educational as well. There are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say.

Robert Venturi, like Kay Larson, is a sterling example of the "special kind of intellectual" that Hannah Arendt had in mind. Behind their jus'-plain-folks anti-elitism is a particularly insidious brand of elitism: an elitism that would deny the public what is most valuable in our cultural heritage in the name of ideological accommodation. In this sense, the Seattle Art Museum is more sinned against than sinning. Those who brought it into being wanted to do the right thing. Their mistake was believing that public-spiritedness can be freely exchanged for artistic quality.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letters of Dorothy Richardson

selected, with an introduction, by Gloria G. Fromm

Dorothy Richardson comes to life in her letters as one of the mavericks of modern literature. She belongs—as the letters amply demonstrate—to that uncompromising breed of writers who resist labels, confound critics, and ultimately overturn fictional clichés. The thirteen novels (or "chapter-volumes," as she preferred to call them) that make up *Pilgrimage* have no real counterpart, for they are *sui generis* in their materials as well as their publishing history, which extended over half a lifetime. Perhaps the nearest analogue is Robert Musil's massive prose hybrid *The Man Without Qualities*, left unfinished—like *Pilgrimage*—at his death. And perhaps the Australian outsider, Christina Stead, also bears comparison with Richardson, if not in her political commitment then in the disposition of her unconventional life. But this is a company of originals, who impose their own rules, speak in their own personal idioms, and run all the risks that come with the territory.

What Richardson invented in its English form, and May Sinclair pronounced—to Richardson's dismay—as "stream of consciousness," was left for others to make famous. Joyce and Woolf carried the genre much further than Richardson, who was less of the pure artist than they but also more interested, like Proust, in cultural experience per se as well as its subjective traces. There is no question, of course, as the literary historians have duly registered, that these four writers were the important experimentalists in early modernist prose fiction. Not only did they look for ways to render the very texture of consciousness but they were also engaged in revolutionizing the subject matter of the novel, which in their hands was turning into consciousness itself—as both psychological process and content. But the content differed radically from writer to writer, and so have the four critical reputations.

The prestige accorded to Proust and Joyce has remained relatively stable, while Virginia Woolf's place in the literary pantheon has shifted dramatically since her death in 1941, coinciding with the fresh interest in women writers during the 1960s and 1970s. Dorothy Richardson's position, however, has been consistently ambiguous. She is regarded as a major innovator who altered the shape of the English novel, but her work —even now, and unlike that of Woolf—is neither generally known nor the object of intense and exhaustive literary analysis. Furthermore, Woolf has been admitted into the company of the master prose stylists of the late nineteenth century, bearing out—ironically—what Dorothy Richardson said of her back in the 1930s: that she was "really a man's writer." Yet she has also become a potent feminist icon, while Dorothy Richardson, often disparaged as a "woman's writer," has been disregarded by most women. She has not been taken up by any special group, for that matter, in large measure because she speaks in *Pilgrimage* the dissenting language of a separatist, a lan-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

guage that is literally being forged as the novels progress.

As a further complication, only when *Pilgrimage* was well advanced did the truth about its autobiographical origins become evident—that Dorothy Richardson had set out to give her life an aesthetic shape and character, to mythologize it. In effect, she had found a way to be both herself and someone else at the same time, yet by her own wish—because consciousness mattered more than identity—very little was known about Dorothy Richardson as historical person until after her death in 1957 at the age of eighty-four, when she had already witnessed the failure of several generations of readers to extract from *Pilgrimage* what she had spent a lifetime putting into it.

Forty years old when she began to write *Pilgrimage* just before the First World War, she spent the rest of her life at work on it, a series of books about herself as Miriam Henderson from age seventeen to forty. Every year—or two, or three—as another chapter-volume appeared, the distance in time grew between the writing self and the fictional self, between the events as they had actually occurred and her memory (or use) of them. Over the years, then, as Richardson the "new woman" was growing old, *Pilgrimage* developed into a complex, many-layered autobiographical fiction; but the majority of its readers—unaware of its basis in fact—responded to Miriam Henderson as a character in a serial novel, more interesting initially for the method by which she was presented than in herself. While Dorothy Richardson allowed, perhaps ultimately preferred, *Pilgrimage* to be read as a novel, she was also convinced of the importance and value of her experience as a woman; it was this story—as cultural autobiography—she had committed herself to telling, in detail and with extraordinary faithfulness to states of mind and feeling.

And it was precisely this story—so different in its "feminine" materials from those of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus or Proust's Marcel—that met with the most resistance. The novel-reading world was ready—more or less—to grapple with the scrambled consciousness of Stephen Dedalus or Leopold Bloom but not with Miriam Henderson's—not prepared, in other words, to feel enclosed ("trapped" was the word many readers used) in the mind and emotional experience of a very young, very naïve English girl. Though she would grow up in the course of *Pilgrimage* to become its author, her future, in the early chapter-volumes, was painfully unclear. But one of Richardson's principal aims in writing *Pilgrimage* was to chart—with the utmost fidelity—the education of her heroine's sensibility in the late-Victorian and Edwardian world of her own youth. She meant Miriam Henderson, however, to represent much more than herself, to represent a generation and a class of women in cultural transition. Thus, the autobiographical basis of *Pilgrimage* did not need to be known, for Richardson rightly felt that it had not only integrity and coherence as fiction, but also authority as historical record.

Yet the truth seems to be that even her admirers have been hard pressed to find the general terms that would convey their particular, highly individualized, often personal response to her novelistic tones. Richardson's prose—reflective, undramatic, shunning both highs and lows—appealed to other writers, however, whose own rhythms, like hers, seemed almost atonal. John Cowper Powys, for example, either as man or as writer, did not fit easily into any of the ready-made categories, nor did the other close friends to whom Richardson regularly wrote letters. There was Owen Wadsworth, virtually the "Boy" she liked to call him when he first discovered *Pilgrimage*, in the late Teens, and wrote his first ardent and appealing letter to Dorothy Richardson from the Belfast shop where he was clerking and dreaming of liberation from the social and sexual constraints of England. There was Bryher, of the singular name and character, the wealthy daughter of Sir John Ellerman, who is better known for her long relation-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ship with H.D. but who also played an important role in Richardson's life—in return, she would say, for *Pilgrimage*. There was Peggy Kirkaldy, the "Twenties" woman, who endeared herself to Richardson as a "worldly, ribald, gallant little Pagan"; Henry Savage, minor poet, editor, and raconteur, and to Richardson the perennial and stimulating Male Antagonist; and S. S. Koteliansky, Russian-émigré friend of Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield, translator and publisher's reader, who arranged for the 1938 "omnibus" edition of *Pilgrimage* and —through misunderstandings detailed in her letters—may have helped to ensure its fate as an unfinished work.

These, along with Powys, were Richardson's major correspondents, to whom she wrote frequently until the end. But there were minor correspondents as well: John Austen, the artist and illustrator; Bernice Elliott, a young American writer from Michigan; E. B. C. Jones, English novelist and first wife of F. L. Lucas, the classicist and Cambridge don; Ruth Suckow, the American regionalist from Iowa. And there were other letters, both professional and personal, to a variety of recipients, including her artist-husband Alan Odle, her younger sister Jessie, Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Wells, Curtis Brown, Alfred Knopf, Edward Garnett, Hugh Walpole, Compton Mackenzie, Middleton Murry, Claude Houghton, H.D., and Sylvia Beach. Needless to say, not all the letters Richardson wrote have been found. Among the missing are many to her sister from the time she left England to settle, ultimately, in San Antonio, Texas, and a large number to H. G. Wells, with whom—through his wife—she became friends in 1896. Probably written for the most part during the early years of the century, they were still in existence when Wells died in 1946 but vanished soon after, under curious circumstances that can only be surmised.

Along with the few letters Richardson exchanged with Alan Odle before their marriage, all of which are noteworthy as social and personal documents, the Powys correspondence, too, has survived virtually intact, save for an occasional gap. Powys edged his way into Dorothy Richardson's life during the summer of 1929, when she was already corresponding regularly with Owen Wadsworth, Bryher, and Peggy Kirkaldy, and when—as these letters from that decade show—she was living in several worlds at once, past and present. There was her husband's art world, with its own trends and movements, and the new world of the cinema, about which she found she had opinions. There was the world of the "potboiler"—as she called it—to which she struggled to adapt, knowing full well she could not achieve the "crispness" (or the output) of a Rebecca West. And there was, of course, the vanished world of her youth being re-created but also depersonalized in her novels, not to mention the world replacing it, in which her fictional self was being judged.

In brief, when John Cowper Powys met her, Dorothy Richardson was part of London's cultural scene, praised and vilified in equal measure. Powys himself was still living in America, where he had gone early in the century to lecture on literature, leaving behind an incompatible wife and an only child, both of whom he continued to support and to visit on periodic trips back to England. It was on one of these trips home that he arranged—not without difficulty—to call on Dorothy Richardson at her London address in Saint John's Wood, an artists' quarter that was closer-in and less "toney" than Hampstead. Although she recognized Powys's family name and had actually read T. F. Powys's best-selling fable, *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* (1927), Richardson knew hardly anything about his brother John and was not especially eager to meet him. Yet before the meeting was over, Powys had extracted from her a promise to write to him in New York, and before he sailed from Southampton, he sent her a follow-up letter to make sure she would not forget her promise. She might well have thought the Powyses were closing in on her, for shortly after she wrote her first letter to him, still

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

another member of the family crossed her path: John's younger brother Llewelyn, met at a party in H.D.'s London flat. Moreover, an article about John had appeared in the *London Mercury*, telling her what he had omitted to mention himself—that he, too, was the author of several books, including a long, brilliant, quirky novel called *Wolf Solent*, which was just out.

She would learn soon enough some of the other things about himself that Powys had kept back on the occasion of their first meeting, in part because he was committed to drawing her out. He had pledged a full report on the author of *Pilgrimage* to the young American woman waiting for him in New York, Phyllis Playter, whose existence and central role in Powys's life he did not divulge to Dorothy Richardson until later. But if she was to be surprised by Phyllis Playter, he had already been caught unawares by Richardson's husband.

In his way, Odle was as distinctive a figure as the lean and magnetic Powys—extremely tall, shockingly thin, cadaverously pale, and exceedingly courteous. Though Powys said nothing about it in his running account of the visit, he would surely have taken in the obvious disparity in age between Richardson and her husband. Like Phyllis Playter, Alan Odle was considerably younger than his partner—by fifteen years, to be exact—but for many more reasons than this, they would have struck Powys, as they struck nearly everyone else, as a most unlikely pair.

They had met in 1915, in the Queen's Terrace house where Odle had been living for several years and drinking away both his health and his banker-father's allowance at the famous Café Royal. Otherwise he lived only to draw, but by the time Dorothy Richardson met him he had little in print to show for a decade of work: the illustrations to an edition of Oscar Wilde's *The Sphinx*, and all the decorative art—plus full-page drawings—for the two published issues of *The Gypsy*, a magazine put together by Odle and Henry Savage that did not survive the war. It was in the Café Royal that Alan Odle heard about a new novel called *Pointed Roofs*, whose author—he soon discovered—lived in the Queen's Terrace house. For *her* part, Dorothy Richardson learned very quickly that his knowledge of literature was much broader than hers and his drawings like nothing she had ever seen before: so full of a fierce and gruesome vitality that you could almost hear them. But as the letters before their marriage show, quaintly addressed to Miss Richardson and Mr. Odle, with his lurid decorations in the margins, she took the drawings in stride, claimed she could read them for his psychic state, and even so, decided he was safe to marry.

How right she was! In spite of the decadent surface, Alan Odle had the character of an austere moralist, for whom art and literature were the only necessities. His savagery, moreover, found complete expression in his drawings, so that—though iron-willed—he was also singularly undemanding, content to lead his own active and independent interior life. One of Dorothy Richardson's primary needs was thus fully satisfied—for a relationship that thrived on impersonality, on a certain distance that did not, however, mean remoteness.

The marriage, then, was a complete success, but Alan Odle's career was even less remunerative than his wife's; her novels accumulated debts to their publisher (against advances) more than anything else. From the time of their marriage in 1917, they took to spending only the summer months in Alan's run-down bachelor rooms at 32 Queen's Terrace. The rest of the year they lived cheaply on the north coast of Cornwall, where Dorothy Richardson thought (with good reason) that the moderate climate would suit Alan Odle, who had been diagnosed as tubercular during the First World War.

She herself liked the solitude and ruggedness of the north coast, which she had come to know through her novelist-friend J. D. Beresford. In the spring of 1912, when Hugh Walpole was also vacationing there, she stayed with Beresford and his wife, who then lent her their cottage for the six fall and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

winter months. Here, in the tiny hamlet of Trehemborne, near Saint Merryn, Richardson wrote the first volume of *Pilgrimage.* And it was to the Saint Merryn-Constantine-Padstow area that she introduced Alan Odle after their marriage. Until the Second World War, they went nowhere else, except for the winter of 1923-24, spent in Switzerland with Bryher's help and followed by ten glorious days in Paris. This meant that, for much of the year, letters were their principal means of making contact with the larger world, and they became a veritable life-line during the Second World War, when travel was out of the question. After the war, to their own great surprise, neither one of them had the inclination to leave Cornwall. When Alan Odle died in 1948, Dorothy Richardson stayed on alone until she was moved in the early Fifties to a nursing home near London.

At which time the letters cease, as if suddenly turned off, indeed as if a strong mind had simply shut down without warning, for until that point there was scarcely a sign of mental age. In fact, the letters she wrote, during the war and after, as an old woman, are indispensable to the portrait of Dorothy Richardson that emerges from her correspondence, a portrait that makes it possible—perhaps once and for all—to distinguish between the actual and the mythological creator of Miriam Henderson, between the author of *Pilgrimage*, with its composed version of her formative years, and the woman living out the rest of her far-from-ordinary life.

—*Gloria G. Fromm*

TO EDWARD GARNETT[1]

Rose Cottage.
Trevone.
Padstow.
North Cornwall.
Feb.7.1920.

Dear Mr. Garnett,

We have been wanting to write to you ever since we came down. We began with a whole months holiday at Trehemborne, & came on here bucolic & brainless to take up work in the intervals of running our well-beloved but extremely primitive & inconvenient little cottage. Its inconveniences are enhanced this year by the dampness of the Padstow coal. It will hardly burn when dry, being mostly stone; & it takes a mornings careful nursing & dosing, with paraffine, candle-ends, whole candles, sugar, margarine, to achieve anything that will cook. Housework takes all day, necessary correspondence could take all day, looking at Cornwall the same. So that work is a very varying possibility, & arrears of personal correspondence mount up & up. And now your article in The Nation[2] robs me of the chance of writing to you without an excuse. It has set me in a glow. I grow so weary of the tide of irrelevancies. We shouted with joy over your group, from the husband on the hearthrug to the governess with something on her mind; & sunned ourselves in the blaze of the clarity of your dealing with the way lives sweep in & out & away & round again. "Thats the stuff to givum" said Alan astonishingly, for his epitaph will be "he was polite." My joy in your article was partly relief for poor little Interim was written in a perfect gale of difficulties & disturbances; & though I felt moderately satisfied with the first part, the rest I knew was thin & badly foreshortened. I feel *furious* with the London Mercury. Arnold Bennett's letter tempts me to burst into epistolary vituperation & sue the reviewer for damaging libel.[3] For it is damaging to say that because I have tried to convey the "fragmentary etc:" world of an adolescent, therefore my view of life is fragmentary etc: abnormal & so on. It is calculated to head off that large class of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

readers who dislike the abnormal & would, left to themselves, read my quite sane books with innocent satisfaction. The article on Mackenzie is the extremest example of vixenish unconscious indecency I have met.

I am reading Candide, & though I delight in it, I do not really want to translate it. I love satire, but I think in some way I am not at home in it. I agree fully with you when you say that everything in the world today calls for it & we have giggled endlessly over your book & wept.[4] I can under influence be wrought up to a white heat of pure bolshevik rage; but left to myself I can be either bolshevik or diamond grabbing imperialist or anything or nothing by turns. And there are such a number of other things going on in the world.

We are still vibrating from a visitation. The Beresfords & Miss May Sinclair whom we had not met, descended upon us from Watergate Bay. We had a happy afternoon, but awoke aghast after they had gone to the realisation that they were both frozen & starved. We forget how hard we get down here. Alan is doing marvels with his tribute to Poe. Deadlock [Vol. VI] is happy down here in the neighbourhood of the birthplace of Pointed Roofs; & within a stones throw of the place where I heard that you had prevailed with Duckworth & I was free to go on. My gratitude does not decrease.

With kindest regards from us both
Yours sincerely
Dorothy M. Richardson.

1 Edward Garnett (1868-1937), reading for Duckworth, had recommended the publication of *Pointed Roofs* (1915), the first volume of *Pilgrimage*.

2 Garnett reviewed *Interim*, Vol. V, in the issue of January 31, calling attention to "the feminine multiple consciousness busily at work."

3 *Interim* was reviewed (anonymously) in the February issue, which also carried a letter from Bennett complaining about a review of his play *Sacred and Profane Love*.

4 Garnett's book, published in 1919, was a collection of his highly critical essays on the war and patriotism and Christian ethics: *Papa's War and Other Satires*.

TO E. B. C. JONES[1]

Trevone Cottage.
Trevone.
Padstow.
North Cornwall.
May 12th. 1921.

Dear Mrs. Lucas,

I am abashed; dismayed; face to face forever with the having *extorted* from you a second so kind letter.

My little idea was that if by any chance the letter you so tantalisingly withheld were still in existence, you should append to it a line of drastic criticism & let me have the whole.

My present abasement does not however prevent me from being immensely interested in all you have, this time, to say. I agree, with groans, as to the opening of "The Tunnel" [Vol. IV]. I attempted a compressed retrospect & achieved almost nothing at all. This business of compression, so essential, if the unity & continuity of consciousness is to be conveyed, gets of course more troublesome as the material accumulates, though at the same time it is made a little easier by Miriam's increasing articulateness. It is this last factor, I think, that must be the "explanation" of your impression of a general increase of lucidity in the books. Just as her early vagueness accounts for the sacrifice of direct information. It has been "horrible" to refrain from objective descriptions of her family (Sarah by the way just 24, Eve 23, Miriam & Harriett 17 & 16 respectively—& Miriam rather dumpy & *not* tall—about 5.4'—it was a short person who called her tall—but she did not observe that, only that somebody called her *tall.*) & surroundings. The people & surroundings that come later are clearer because you see her seeing them, for the first time, & share her impressions such as they are.

You make one comment that leaves me gasping; almost *squinting* with astonishment. You find that Miriam has "a high moral tone"! I feel like shrieking where is it? *Do* let me see it—& so on. I look in vain for any tone of any sort. I look in Honeycomb

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

[Vol. III]—in memory for my copy has gone astray, & see her aesthetically revelling, attracted to a Society divorcée, rejoicing in clandestine meetings with an elderly roué, pitying her sisters married to the suburbs & duty; determined for her own part to hold on at any cost to a life that "features" etchings & masses of roses.

Presently the meaning of your judgment may dawn on me. I am extremely slow in grasping meanings.

Thanking you again for your kind letter
I am
Yours sincerely
Dorothy M. Richardson.

P.S. Your titles are "perfect." I have noted them against the day when I may be able to summon books at will. At present there is not the smallest indication that such a day will ever arrive. D.R.

1 Emily Beatrix Coursolles Jones (1893-1966) published six novels in all, the last in 1932. *Quiet Interior* had appeared in 1920.

TO P. BEAUMONT WADSWORTH

32 Queen's Terrace.
N.W.8.
[Summer 1922]

Dear Wadsworth,

The whole length of our mantelshelf is a holiday in Central Europe.[1] Wandertage! Bernard's Wandertage? Bernard en Flâneur? Bernard sees Europe? Bernard en Prince? Expansion? The Idler? Meantime, give your Observer no peace. Foam with observations. Have you any notes for further fervid frothings from a foreign fireside? Fireflies to flout the frost? Or are you letting the whole simmer together, bursting to the spontaneous boiling up of detail on to the surface, at those moments when life turns the tap of the gas ring full on?

Best thanks for the magazines, both most interesting, particularly the work of the youth who is beginning what promises to be a strenuous career with faithful imitations of Blake. Get one of your solvent friends to send you the August number of the Mercury. I haven't seen it. But the papers are full of it. "A brilliant prose caricature of the styles of Miss Richardson & Miss Mansfield." [2] An exaggeration of mannerisms already so highly exaggerated that parody is no small achievement—& so forth. "A Conversation in Ebury Street" by George Moore. And much sentimental reminiscence from W. B. Yeats.

Then there is a new star about to swim into our system. A Quarterly. "The [Centurion: cancelled] Criterion." A constellation of contributors including most of the moderns together with Saintsbury, Lethaby,[3] & not, oh, not, Mr. Gosse.[4] Marvellous. The 15th October 12/-yearly;[5] single numbers., Publisher Cobden Sanderson Thavies Inn.

My untidy room? Sir, it is a model. For a combined studio & writing-room, restaurant, laundry, salon & dressmakers shop —with a tailoring department, run by a cook-general, it is a model of order. *Bah!* At the present moment the cook general is also a house decorator. Painting all that rather dingy wood. In odd moments. Do you remember Adrian Allinson,[6] on the eve of going to steep his soul in Serbian strife? We heard a little later that Serbia had changed into Switzerland & lonely soul steeping into an engagement of marriage shortly to be fulfilled. Ever since then A.[lan] has been on the point of writing his felicitations. Last week he really sat down, armed with the Swiss letter which he fondly believed had been pocketed a month or two, to write a suitable response. Tea interrupted the performance & presently a caller, Allinson himself, the happy father of a son nearly two years old. We were struck afresh by the assimilations of the Hebrew. He is now utterly Swiss. Swiss beard, Swiss cloak, Swiss gestures, intonation, aperçu, patriotism, mountain nostalgia, civic consciousness, all complete. A very dear creature. He wants a tenant for his studio house in FitzRoy Square & to waste no time in getting back to his mountains.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Adieu. I am struggling, faint, very faint, but pursuing, with the end of Revolving Lights [Vol. VII].

Love from us both
Dorothy M.R.

1 Wadsworth was traveling for two months in Austria, Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Germany. He had also begun to contribute pieces about the cultural life in Prague to the London Sunday paper, *The Observer*. "Bernard" was the hero of his attempts at writing fiction.

2 The clever piece was by Susan Miles and had the covering title "Two Novelists," with the first section called "Blind-Alley (with apologies to D . . . R . . .)" and the second "Volte-Face (With apologies to K. . . . M. . . .)."

3 William Richard Lethaby (1857-1931) was the English architect, teacher, and writer on art.

4 Sir Edmund William Gosse (1849-1928), influential literary critic since the late nineteenth century.

5 That is, 12 shillings yearly.

6 Adrian Allinson (1890-1959), artist and friend of Alan Odle in his bohemian days.

TO P. BEAUMONT WADSWORTH

Harlyn.
Padstow.
North Cornwall.
Nov. 11th 1922.

Dear Wadsworth,

Nice little précis on Mozart. Very German in style. . . .

I hope you now have enough material for Wells. There is very little in Beresford's book.[1] Three main points as I remember: (Its a *very* short thing, uniform with a 'series') 1. enthusiasm over Wells' style, (précis of the books very slight)—2. forecast with regard to his final reputation: that he will not live by virtue of his characterisation but 3. by virtue of his anger & dismay over the state of the world as it is. If you want a note on Wells as M. P. which next week he may be,[2] there is an article in a recent number of the Herald by D.R. "a novelist of rare distinction" pointing out that ["]his career will be meteoric etc: that he will burst through the flimsy machinery of parl. procedure like a cannon ball through tissue paper, that P. will not change our Wells, but Wells may change our P. etc: etc: That there is a thing that makes him the man of all men to be entrusted with a chance of helping to steer the political ship. This thing is his intense vision of the world as a society of friends. There are "wiser" men than Wells, steadier men. But there is no one more passionately, practically aware of the obstructions holding up the emergence of the new world, no one more fertile in plans for their removal. More than any other he has taught us to think in terms of the world as a whole. The things he foresaw & shouted into deaf ears for half a life-time, have come about. Now, in the midst of our threatened extinction, he stands, more clearly, more articulately than any other public man for the possibilities of the future. Etc: Etc: W. sheds his opinions every few years. But his vision remains. In that he will never change. It is that which makes him trustworthy; may even make him limit himself to remaining patiently & permanently within the machinery of pol. administration." You know of course he stands Labour—in name; but actually independent as he says he don't agree with the Lab: Party. He stands for *all* workers, all who produce & contribute. Doesn't want a capital levy, but "a levy on inflated incomes."

Michael called for your Schieles[3] early on Monday. I was writing my article for Fyfe[4] against time—also the drawings were, to him, unexpectedly large—(A. was in the bosom of his family)[.] So we hurriedly arranged he should turn up at tea. He didn't. On our way to the Burlington we met him coming along. We all supped together, but A. & I had to go on. So we decided, since there isn't a chance in a thou. of his selling the drawings that we should stack them up safely & leave them till the spring. They are immensely able—almost as good as John,[5] but too outspoken to pass over here except among the porns. We thought M. looking well & are glad he is to be out of London for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the winter. B.J.[6] has I think more insight than "ideas"—that's why he did better with his Women Novelists. His 'goodness' leads him astray in dealing with the men.

We're still reeling with the fatigues of the intensive social life—almost day & night—very glorious—of the weeks before we left. With the fatigues of digging ourselves out & digging ourselves in down here. The winter promises to be as strenuous as last year. No help to be had. Try & get Lubbock. I want if I can [to] beg borrow or steal them there books of Prousts.[7]

In great haste, between bouts of unpacking & distributing; arranging four rooms & a shed to the best advantage for comfort & convenience—(We have an adorable cat as guest for the winter. An old friend—)

Yours as ever
D.O.

1 Beresford's book (*H. G. Wells*) had been published in 1915. Wadsworth, living in Prague, was preparing to lecture on Wells.

2 Wells was a Labour candidate for the Parliamentary seat allotted to the University of London.

3 Egon Schiele (1890-1918), Austrian Expressionist, died in the influenza epidemic of 1918.

4 H. Hamilton Fyfe (b. 1869) was editor of the *Daily Herald*, where DMR's electioneering piece on Wells had just appeared.

5 Augustus John (1878-1961), the British painter and graphic artist notorious for his bohemian life style.

6 R. Brimley Johnson was the author of *Some Contemporary Novelists (Women)*, published in 1920, and of a companion volume on men (1922).

7 The first two volumes of Proust's novel had just been translated into English as *Swann's Way*. Percy Lubbock's book *The Craft of Fiction* had appeared in 1921, praised by DMR as "the best bit of constructive criticism of modern work I have met. . . . He really understands what is happening."

TO P. BEAUMONT WADSWORTH

Trevone.
Padstow.
North Cornwall.
Ap 30th 1923.

Dear Wadsworth,

Scarcely a letter have I written this winter that has not been extorted, business & family affairs & "crises" amongst friends being the principal extortioners. We are in diggings now & my hands are no longer grimed & shaky with toil, nor my head spinning with a multitude of housewifely preoccupations. But since I am trying to cram a year's work into six weeks my letters now that I can write them must be brief; though my conscience is heavy with debt; particularly to you, for your letters & postcards & the showers of other blessings from Prague—falling not only upon ourselves but also, gratefully, upon Savage[1] who came down for a few weeks & stayed till the other day & upon his Lady, who came at Christmas for a week & left also only the other day. They are both now confirmed Cornwellians, desirous moreover of reducing all their friends to the same state of salvation. We begin to realise that it is time to seek fresh fields.

Most eagerly did we all devour those entirely fascinating small volumes of modern German art. I am reading the letterpress now to Alan in English. Such thorough, well-thought lucid disquisitions they are. So suggestive of leisure & the certainty of large public interest. One might imagine there was nothing going on but a bright small renaissance.

Congratulations to you on getting into the high & mighty Westminster. You write your journalism something splendid, & I must confess to puzzlement over the fact that the things you do less hurriedly are not nearly so good. Two things you sent me months ago I've only just had time to read. Both excellent material. But the Macnamara[2] fails to convince because the excellent generalisations are scattered over the record; leaving the impression of a seasaw of statement & commentary. *Nostalgia* which ought to be good achieves a sad, though interesting fall between two methods, the direct method (what the critics call the indirect method, but we know as the method of direct unmediated experience) & the method of statement, of giving information.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Information there must be, but the moment its given directly as information, the sense of immediate experience is gone. Yet [to present] nothing but immediate experience spells the titanic failure of Joyce. It is the great & abiding problem of all those who take the inward way, this business of getting something tremendously there as it were unawares. I haven't solved it. But a recognition of it all the time is necessary in order to avoid total wreckage of the sense of direct experience.

Have you had anything more in *The Dial*? I sent you vol. vii a few days ago. Reviews are a compôte of guarded appreciation & unguarded scorn. I see that Murry has come to the point of discovering that the Proust-Richardson-Joyce combine, I believe he calls it, represents the fact that the novel is ceasing to be primarily a story. Lawrence recognises it as the slow decadence (oh sublime shibboleth) of the novel, taking an infantile interest in its own symptoms.[3]

I have had a mild row with Knopf. Wells & other travellers saying in no measured terms that my circulation in the big towns alone would more than trebly account for the thousand I am supposed to sell, & my huge mass of readers' effusions from little remote places all over the states, all this taken together with a rumour that friend K's methods were not uniformly above suspicion caused me to protest. Result a vague, writhing letter from Knopf, & his decision to buy sheets from Duckworth instead of setting up. He has bought an edition of 500. My correspondents would almost account for the lot. It is a mystery. Meanwhile I am slowly becoming a journalist.

Lunch is announced. A shock. I'm not yet used to meals by magic. Alan flourishes & desires to present you with hearty greetings. We both find your last photograph a masterpiece. More foreign than a foreigner.

Show your magnanimity by letting us continue to share your pilgrimage là bas, or rather perhaps là-haut, for C.S.[4] seems to get bigger & higher every day, its bright head rears itself over here in the most unexpected quarters.

Yours in persistent amity
Dorothy Richardson

My small brother-in-law's second book "The Clockwork Man"[5] has been received with a vast unanimous roar of applause. Its a huge lark & something more. I'll get a copy sent out to you. It would translate by the way.
D.R.

1 Henry Savage (1879-1965) was Alan Odle's literary friend from the days of *The Gypsy*.
2 Apparently Wadsworth had written a piece about Brinsley MacNamara (John Weldon), the Irish novelist and playwright.
3 John Middleton Murry's article, "The Break-up of the Novel," appeared in *The Yale Review* (October 1922), and Lawrence's, "Surgery for the Novel—or a Bomb," in the *Literary Digest International Book Review* (April 1923), reprinted in *Phoenix*.
4 Czecho-Slovakia.
5 AO's brother, E. V. Odle, had just published *The Clockwork Man*, a novel.

TO H. D.

[London, Summer 1925?]

Bella & dear Lady:

I've read your things[1] & write now a word in case when you come, I, Roman burgess, am too shy. They are wonderful to me, both, all one glowing texture, authentic. They are what one expects of H. D. poetry pure, woven tapestry between heaven & earth. And, for their peculiar individual zest, that fresh close reality of a past that is not past. Bang goes the sighing sentimentality of ostrich aesthete, bang also the underestimations of the secularist. Your world is the poet's world persisting all along history, all along humanity. Your Egypt & your Greece stand in my mind side by side, alive, irrevocable.

For the *stories* I find Hipparchia the best. But less well fused than the other as to manner—pretty often two tones that don't blend. A strain here & there where the original tone drops, not to simplicity but to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stiffness. Its the devil, I know. No one speaking & writing English can keep quite clear of baroque. Either baroque or a tone unified at great cost. In *Secret Name* I find the same trouble less often. I don't like the Jamesian inversions. Damned difficult to find the right substitute. Difficult to handle simplicities, 'facts', details without the jolt of colloquialism, abrupt descent into three dimensions. I'll keep [your things?] as you are coming over.

Love
Dorothy

1 H.D. appears to have sent DMR two parts of what would be published in 1926 as *Palimpsest*, her novel in three parts.

TO P. BEAUMONT WADSWORTH

32 Queen's Terrace.
N.W. 8.
[Summer 1925]

Dear P.B.W.

Correspon*dent* Boston Abende [Evening] Transcript usw. Salutations! And the best of thanks for the two Prousts. (Did I ever acknowledge Arnold Waterlow?[1] Read with great expectations—of Miss S's "long-awaited Absolute Masterpiece"—for a page or two, & read *through* with blushes. For indeed its the Penny Novelette in Excelsis). Alan is revelling in them. For which I am thankful. For the poor dear having had an exhibition that created a Stir, & drew crowds & from the critics many prognostications of the Rush—at some far distant time—to secure Odles—has not sold a single picture. A year's work. Impasse.

My *Trap* [Vol. VIII] press: Brickbats & vitriol, & here & there a more understanding appreciation than I've yet had. I understand the bewilderment &—seeing that they lack imagination—the Boredom of most men in a world of which they know nothing. But their *Fury* is a little puzzling. Duckworth, growing weary, completely losing interest, listed the volume once & once only —no comment. No advance notices. No nothing. No one knows the book is out. For the next he offers—£25. Impasse.

One Pippett[2]—engaging name—writes for Ulysses. It shall be sent. The poor thing has been stabbed by a nail. To get it through the customs we wrapped it in many papers & hid it under masses of lingerie at the bottom of our wicker trunk. Banging & bashing did the rest. But the book is not injured. Mercer has not turned up. I will look out Egon Schiele against his coming.[3]

Tea parties rage here. Strange young people, boys & girls send m.s. & *call*. Letters multiply. In the intervals of cooking, cleaning, washing ironing & mending, marketing, & keeping A. O. in the Air, I dither & scribble. Thus one has, without any of its rewards, all the taxes of a certain measure of notoriety.

How are you & when are you visiting England & London?
Dorothy M.R.

[On back of second sheet]: Am sending you Trap

1 May Sinclair's novel *Arnold Waterlow: A Life* had been published in September 1924.
2 Wadsworth's friend Roger Pippett, whose wife, Aileen, would write one of the earliest critical studies of Virginia Woolf's work, *The Moth and the Star* (1953).
3 These were the drawings Wadsworth had left with them and that DMR thought might not be safely sent through the post.

TO BRYHER

Trevone Cottage
Trevone.
Padstow.
[April 1928]

Dear Bryher:

We got here yesterday & I'm thankful to be under a roof that doesn't report every drop of rain. Your card this morning. Thanks ever so much for the books in advance.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Duckworth's statement just in. Oberland [Vol. IX] sales *300* to end of year. Feel its not much use preparing another vol. for Duck. Knopf has just published & New York Times is ecstatic but joins to its review a photograph of a thin-lipped, woe-begone, contemptuous, grey-haired, utterly brainless & very "refeened" spinster - Miss D. R.[1] G. B. Stern writes a long leader, columns & columns in N. Y. Herald Tribune, brilliant vitriol. *The New Adelphi* to whom I sent a fat, meaty, really very decently done review, fifteen hundred words—at their urgent request & which delights them—have paid—15/[2] therefore & propose for their next number Proust & two books on fem. (my selections) all to be done in two pages—at the same rate.[3] So that's that & I fear I cannot afford to be on their staff.

I posted off your little copybooks, feeling frightened to carry them around, together with C3.[?] to Audley St. marked *please keep.*

Will get off *Cinema Slums*[4] in the course of a few days.

With love, in haste,
Dorothy.

P.B[.] Wadsworth now in New York is screaming for *Close Ups*. I sent him early copies & he's been carrying them around in California. Can I give him any news of U.S.A. edition?

1 DMR was plagued by the existence of an American writer named Dorothy Richardson whose books as well as photograph were often attributed to her.

2 That is, 15 shillings.

3 DMR's "Portrait of an Evangelist" (a review of J. D. Beresford's novel *All or Nothing*) appeared in Murry's *New Adelphi* in March. In the June issue she had "Das Ewig-Weibliche," a review of *Feminism* by H. A. Wieth-Knudsen (translated from the Danish) and *Leisured Women* by Viscountess Rhondda. Her review of "Mr. Clive Bell's Proust" was published in the issue of December 1928-February 1929.

4 "The Cinema in the Slums," No. 10 in DMR's series for *Close Up* (called "Continuous Performance"), appeared in the May issue.

TO JOHN COWPER POWYS

32. Queen's Terrace.
N.W.8.
Sept.'29.

Dear John, Cowper Powys:

No thoughts [about his novel *Wolf Solent*]. Thoughts not yet risen for skimming off. But I must tell you I have met: Llewelyn. Hilda Aldington's small parlour in Sloane St., Highish window's afternoon light falling directly on to a central figure, a fragment immobile, exquisite, curled in upon its small upright self, of Russian ballet—Mrs. *Wilkinson*?[5] Falling indirectly upon one serene, surveying life, apparently from the datum line & a little distrusting raids on either side said line: Alyse Gregory[6] (I may be wrong, I scarcely had speech with her.) Various others. And in a corner, dynamically blazing with its own light: L. P.

Fleeing at the first possible moment into the blaze . . . now how to describe the little brother who has "moulded himself on John"? You know the slightly-bent-in thought, in reflection, head-profile unconscious, terribly innocent, *pure*; ascetic, breath-catching beauty? Definitely Christian-mystic beauty. "Ahead of Pagan-mystic beauty & Hinduistic & Buddhist-mystic beauty, yet sharing something with them all." An untouchable. Yet how besieged, overtly & covertly, & to be besieged. (Even in New Mexico. Don't let him go there John, if he's seeking for health in the parts lauded by D.H.L. Its too *high*. Too stringing up. Lawrence is now paying for that too-invigorating air).

It is a something found at its best only in large, crowded, yet harmonious families, in a community-life that has no peer on earth.

Are all six brethren thatched similar? In deep ridges defying the closest cropping. And have all the terrific eyebrows? And are all rays from a centre? (I have no means of imagining the three sistern, nor any curiosity for them. Ah-*ha*. [Exactly. Why *ah-ha*? Why grins? *M.* loq.])

And what happens when they all stand in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a ring, joining hands? Anyone alighting in the centre would surely be wrapped in white flame & either disappear into "the air" or at least be lifted to maximum intensity of individual being whatever that may be.

But rings do their happy work & break, & life is lived individually &, according to L. the little moment of individual apprehension is all we have. (What, by the way, is that strange chain, hand-cuff, bear's chain of huge links L. wears that catches the eye & sets one wondering over its curious suitability to one so solid & so porous?) What became of your influence when he reached his conclusion. Of your definition of the all-powerful earth & its multitudinous gods? Was it too much for one who yet seems lit from an all-powerful heaven & its multitudinous saints & single changeless centre?

Lived individually. The pattern insists. The gesture half-ruefully, half-smilingly president over the human nursery: smacks, forgiveness, perpetual bo-peep—insists that individual lives are placed spatially remote from their relatives. Roman Catholic deprecation of in-turned relationships reflects it.

L. & I agreed that the artist's link with religion is nearly quite entirely aesthetic & that therefore 'they' won't have us inside. Nor will the "art" artists quite have us. So we are more or less condemned to the ivory tower. Perhaps von Hügel[7] is right in claiming "science" & "art" as absolutes. And you are right with your cult. It is the artist's way through in the sense Blake meant when he said "a tear is an intellectual thing."[8]

But *what* is astonishment? L. seems free of that. You are not. You are more feminine? You do find it astonishing each day to open a window. You *see* soap-dishes (good Lord, a soap-dish!) & cups, & linoleum.

And there you are in your New York snows & thunderstorms & yet so near. And L. so near in his coastguard cottage. So all this communication is superfluous. "Le supérflu, chose nécessaire." And it is good once in a way to say "Pass the mustard." *Pass*, everything is there, *the*, queer Aryan particularism, *mustard*, amazing phenomenon. How you must delight in Montaigne's *Que sçais-je* which is enough of an affirmation.

Adieu then, John. Time, if no other ruler, will presumably prevent my launching out like this again. No matter. But I may presently send a few incoherent Wolf notes. Alan's & my bookmarkers chase & collide through the volume now, I rejoice to see in its second English edition.

Dorothy M.R.

Don't dream that you are expected to rival this feminine volubility!

1 This was the second wife of Louis Wilkinson, friend of the Powys family, who wrote under the name Louis Marlow. His first wife was H.D.'s friend Frances Gregg.

2 Alyse Gregory was Llewelyn's wife.

3 Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925), Roman Catholic religious writer and biblical critic, was born in Florence, son of the Austrian ambassador, and settled in England in 1871. He wrote (among other books) *The Mystical Element in Religion* (1908-09).

4 From "The Grey Monk": "For a tear is an intellectual thing, / And a sigh is the sword of an angel king, / And the bitter groan of the martyr's woe / Is an arrow from the Almighty's bow."

These letters are published with the permission of the Estate of Dorothy Richardson.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The heart is slow to learn

by Mary Jo Salter

Edna St. Vincent Millay, that once-towering literary figure, was less than five feet tall and only eighteen years old when she wrote the 214-line philosophical poem, "Renascence," that would make her famous. One evening, her enchanting public reading of it (she was a fine elocutionist and amateur actress, with an accent that was said to sound vaguely British but like nobody else's), in conjunction with her performance of songs of her own composing, induced a listener, Caroline B. Dow, to raise money to send this girl from rural Maine to Vassar. She inspired loyalty. Later, in Greenwich Village, she became the idol not only of the critics but of a generation of Americans who saw her as the embodiment of the flapper era; they learned by heart her defiant sonnets addressed to the lovers she had let go, few of whom seemed to blame her seriously or for long. When she died, at the age of fifty-eight, in 1950, she had produced what would constitute a *Collected Poems* of over seven hundred pages, as well as translations, plays, and an opera libretto. And yet her passing went barely remarked in the literary journals. Today, although her *Collected Poems* remains in print, she is often regarded as something of a joke, and is denied even a token appearance in most of the respected anthologies.

Millay's story is one of our century's most extreme cautionary tales about the whims of critical favor. In his memoirs, her friend Max Eastman judged her sonnet sequence "Epitaph for the Race of Man" to be "the only poem in the language since Milton that can be compared in mental boldness with Dante and Lucretius." A more reliable critic, Edmund Wilson (who was, however, desperately in love with her for years and one of her unsuccessful suitors in marriage), called her "one of the only poets writing in English in our time who have attained anything like the stature of great literary figures." Likewise poets and critics with no personal attachment to her regarded her highly indeed: Edward Davison put her in Robert Frost's league, and Thomas Hardy and A. E. Housman returned her admiration.

Now, for the centenary of her birth, comes a slim new selection of her poems, edited by Colin Falck.[1] The time ought to be auspicious for re-evaluating and at least partly restoring Millay's reputation, given the recent surge of interest both in women poets and in traditional poetic forms. Millay was primarily, unabashedly, a musical and a conventional poet. She could write sonnets that were so Shakespearean—not only in rhyme scheme but in syntax, idiom, and metaphor—that they verged on parody. But if the rise of modernism, with its reverence for the impersonal and the opaque, its concentration on the poem as a visual rather

1 *Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems*, The Centenary Edition, edited and with an introduction by Colin Falck; foreword by Richard Eberhart; HarperCollins, 162 pages, $18.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than an aural object, its taste for the unexpected image, had begun eroding Millay's following as early as the 1930s, Falck's edition makes clear that she did have (off and on) experimental tendencies. Her first free-verse poem, "Spring," opens her collection *Second April*, published when she was twenty-nine—when, that is, her professional career was a decade old but that of most poets has barely started. And some of the unrhymed, or rhymed but unmetered, poems remain among her most appealing.

In hindsight, it seems nearly inevitable that Millay would be ill-served by the anthologists. She was easy to read, but hard to categorize or excerpt. Technically, her interests were so diffuse (one poem could sound like Keats and another like T. S. Eliot) that she stood, as Allen Tate remarked, poised between two eras. Nor could any one Millay poem be read, necessarily, as wholly of the nineteenth century or of the twentieth. Although her love poems are usually conventional in their forms, and often downright antiquated in their locutions, they convey messages rare in the genre, even today, and rarer still—as the critic James Gray noted—in poetry by women. Constancy in love was hardly ever Millay's goal; she never complained of being seduced or misled. Her own clear-headedness about the likelihood of parting often consoled her more than loving or being loved. (Some of her work, indeed, could be characterized less as love poetry than as lust poetry; one sonnet ends, "I find this frenzy insufficient reason / For conversation when we meet again.") Even when she suffered, the anguish she bared and heightened like a romantic poet could be mixed with a very modern irony or detachment that approached cruelty. A clever epigrammatist as well, Millay surely has to be the only poet in our literature who has been compared both to Milton and to Dorothy Parker. To reproduce only the short—whether sardonic or sweet—lyrics in a sampling of her work would be to ignore the trajectory of her ambition: she wrote long, fierce sonnet sequences on great themes—lost love, death, the threatened survival of mankind.

These long sequences, noble of spirit and markedly uneven in execution, point to another difficulty in the preservation of Millay's work. Falck, who in an effort to redress critical neglect has quite rashly called her "the finest American lyricist of the twentieth century" (surely not better than Frost? Roethke? Bogan? Wilbur?), finds it possible to retain just four of the eighteen sonnets that make up "Epitaph for the Race of Man" and only five of the fifty-two in "Fatal Interview." The 162 pages of this new edition are insufficient to do Millay justice. And yet, paradoxically, they are plentiful enough to show us that she often went on too long.

In a late sonnet, she began by vowing "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines," and then proceeded to evoke images of constraint ("pious rape," she rather forcedly called it) for the next thirteen. But sometimes Chaos asks not to become a sonnet; it wants to be confined to ten lines, or four. Millay savored the sharpness of concision in her light verse. The pint-sized "Grown-up" has the right proportions for its funny complaint:

> Was it for this I uttered prayers,
> And sobbed and cursed and kicked the stairs,
> That now, domestic as a plate,
> I should retire at half-past eight?

Despite Millay's frequent success with the sonnet—a form many poets find too short for their purposes—in her hands it could look less cramped than padded, as a sonnet from "Fatal Interview" illustrates:

> Love is not all; it is not meat nor drink
> Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;
> Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink
> And rise and sink and rise and sink again;
> Love cannot fill the thickened lung with
> breath,
> Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured
> bone;
> Yet many a man is making friends with death
> Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.
> It may well be that in a difficult hour,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pinned down by pain and moaning for
release,
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It well may be. I do not think I would.

A satisfying, old-fashioned poem. Yet who isn't disappointed by that fourth line —"And rise and sink and rise and sink again"? The words needn't be repeated to convey the repetition of the action; they're fillers until we arrive at a rhyme for "rain." And the last six lines set up a straw man—how *would* you, practically speaking, trade the memory of love for food?—only to knock it down in the space allotted. It would be another poem entirely (just six lines long, with one line that floats unrhymed) but not necessarily an inferior one if the reader could take a scalpel to it:

Love is not all; it is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;
Love cannot fill the thickened lung with
breath,
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured
bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with
death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

(Of course, we readers "edit" our favorite poems all the time. If we attempt to learn one by heart but always drop a particular line, or rewrite it unintentionally, this may be a sign that the poet is more at fault than we are.)

The ease with which another sonnet from "Fatal Interview" offers itself up for memorization may be a delusory measure of its merit. But I want to reproduce it here also—because it does not appear in Falck's selection, and because it is my favorite of Millay's love sonnets. It illustrates how well she could ramify a theme within the form's restrictions:

Well, I have lost you; and I lost you fairly;
In my own way, and with my full consent.
Say what you will, kings in a tumbrel rarely
Went to their deaths more proud than this
one went.
Some nights of apprehension and hot
weeping
I will confess; but that's permitted me;
Day dried my eyes; I was not one for keeping
Rubbed in a cage a wing that would be free.
If I had loved you less or played you slyly
I might have held you for a summer more,
But at the cost of words I value highly,
And no such summer as the one before.
Should I outlive this anguish—and men do—
I shall have only good to say of you.

"Kings in a tumbrel" gives a hint of the hokey medievalisms Millay was prey to, and the bird-in-the-cage metaphor, like most of her images, is hardly novel. Today, a woman poet wouldn't dream of writing "and men do" when she means "and people do." But the genuineness of the feeling outstrips the conventionalities.

Edmund Wilson, in his touching memoir of Millay in *The Shores of Light*, comments that the "Fatal Interview" sequence is the first poem in which Millay portrays a lover leaving her before she is quite ready to be left. Perhaps only someone who had had as much practice as Millay in falling in and out of love could have played all the notes one hears in these fourteen lines. She shifts from resignation to pride, from helpless grief to self-forgiveness, and back again to pride before closing in a couplet that embraces at once pain, hope, and generosity. The flippancy and self-regard of some of the earliest work has metamorphosed, in a poem she published at the age of thirty-nine, into courage.

What she is proudest of here, notably, is that she never sought "at the cost of words I value highly" to extend the love affair beyond its natural lifespan. It was words—her infatuation with "speaking well" in both senses—that Millay clung to more constantly than she did her lovers. Words offered a musical enchantment but also the opportunity to distance oneself, to make generalizations, to be philosophical (though not at all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

intellectual). This most personal of poets had her impersonal side. As Wilson wrote, Millay did not "give the impression that personality much mattered for her . . . when she came to write about her lovers, she gave them so little individuality that it was usually . . . impossible to tell which man she was writing about." (An early sonnet opened with the mildly shocking disclaimer, "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why / I have forgotten . . .") And choosing the right words was also an exercise of individual freedom—the pursuit of which was a unifying theme for nearly all her poems.

The theme had appeared as early as "Renascence," in which, lying on the grass alone, surrounded by "three long mountains and a wood," and looking up at the sky, she experiences the boundlessness of the natural world as an occasion for claustrophobia:

> I screamed, and—lo!—Infinity
> Came down and settled over me;
> Forced back my scream into my chest . . .

What saves her from suffocation, too many lines later, is a happy recognition not of the world's grandeur but (remember the author is eighteen!) of her own. To the end of her life Millay was selfish, restless, unwilling to be confined; what mitigated the selfishness was her heartfelt wish that other people be selfish too. This sentiment—in its way, a form of compassion—was most evident in the love poems but also surfaced elsewhere, as in the fine ballad "On the Wide Heath," where a "weary traveller" (the cliché is unfortunate), returning to an unhappy family, never considers any other alternative; he will go

> Home to the worn reproach, the disagreeing,
> The shelter, the stale air; content to be
> Pecked at, confined, encroached upon,—
> it being
> Too lonely, to be free.

(One thinks of Millay's musical sense as mainly a business of glissandos and soft-pedaling. But here she pecks at her lines with commas, producing a staccato effect that nicely echoes the encroachments in the traveler's life.)

Such compassion for others, for the common man, informs some of Millay's clumsiest work—a poem about Sacco and Vanzetti, for whom she protested, or her propaganda poems of the Second World War, which may have done the most damage to her reputation. And even in her most admirable work addressed to the human condition, the "Epitaph for the Race of Man" of 1934, she could be as lumbering as the dinosaur that "at morning made his way / And dropped his dung upon the blazing dew." But then, within the same sequence, she could write this nearly perfect beauty of a sonnet, which ought to be served up whole:

> Observe how Miyonoshita cracked in two
> And slid into the valley; he that stood
> Grinning with terror in the bamboo wood
> Saw the earth heave and thrust its bowels
> through
> The hill, and his own kitchen slide from
> view,
> Spilling the warm bowl of his humble food
> Into the lap of horror; mark how lewd
> This cluttered gulf,—'twas here his paddy
> grew.
> Dread and dismay have not encompassed
> him;
> The calm sun sets; unhurried and aloof
> Into the riven village falls the rain;
> Days pass; the ashes cool; he builds again
> His paper house upon oblivion's brim,
> And plants the purple iris in its roof.

The immediacy of the scene is all the more striking from a poet who tended to steal her images from centuries past. "Observe" is the poem's opening instruction, whereas so often Millay urges us chiefly to feel. Here the village under the mountain cracks in two and slides into the following line, which itself cracks in two (by means of a semi-colon). While the brief earthquake requires a full eight lines to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

describe—time being protracted in moments of fear—the stunned aftermath ("days pass; the ashes cool") is a matter of five words. Millay was well-served here by the Petrarchan rhyme scheme (obviating the need for a conclusive-sounding rhyming couplet) and by the sonnet's placement in the middle of its sequence. The purple iris can grow, in its brave and unlikely way, from the new roof without being weighted down by summarizing commentary. If we wince at the posingly poetic "mark how lewd this cluttered gulf" and "'twas," these words alone don't gravely mar the poem's masterly effects elsewhere.

A poet of my acquaintance who has published many books and won well-deserved acclaim says that his ambition is to become a minor poet. He means that a poet of this age or any other will be fortunate indeed, should feel honored in advance, if a few of his poems are preserved in the anthologies a hundred years hence. The major poet typically has not only a largeness of spirit, a breadth of subject matter and tone, but a reliable level of technical competency —usually, of course, brilliance. Even if the range of the oeuvre remains narrow, the relatively consistent quality of execution is essential. Readers may choose to avoid a particular poem in a sequence, a whole sequence, a book, that decade in a poet's life when he took a wrong turn. But when rereading a single poem, we had better not very often feel (as we do with Millay) that we still want to avert our eyes from lines five through eight, or from the first two feet of line eleven, however breathtaking the last three feet may be.

Edna St. Vincent Millay is a fine minor poet, in my view. The unlikelihood of her winning out over the centuries as anything more than that, as someone whose poems generally can be marveled at in every detail, should be no cause for sorrow among her admirers, even those of us who deplore the paltry number of great women poets in English. It's the inconsistency of quality in Millay's poems, not so much among them but *within* them, that makes any selection especially chancy, and bound to disappoint somewhere. As Colin Falck remarks in his introduction (the same introduction in which he calls her "one of the most skillful technicians in the whole history of English poetry"):

> Apostrophes and exclamations, stylized lyric posturings, cutely traditional elisions, poetical inversions of grammar and word-order, personifications of love or death or beauty, nursery-rhyme metrics, slightly-too-facile epigrams, more-than-slightly-too-facile metaphors or symbols, all leap from the page for the casual reader of Millay's *Collected Lyrics* or *Collected Sonnets.*

And we find ourselves chuckling, too, at her anachronistic diction in verses where she is dead serious. What can be done with a poet who writes, in 1931, "Far liefer would I think / Upon my dear"? Even in Falck's edition, which skillfully excises most of the offensive poems, we're left with dreadful single lines like "What fumy wits these modern wags expose."

But Millay affords real pleasures, and one of them is the surprise, in a selection that liberally represents her technique at its most modern, of how wholly satisfyingly she could write in lines of unpredictable lengths, in random rhyme, or in no rhyme at all. Her first experimentation with free verse, or at least freer verse, predates by a few years her marriage (in 1923—the same year that she won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry) to a Dutch businessman, Eugen Boissevain, with whom she would soon escape Greenwich Village to buy a farmhouse in Austerlitz, New York. In moving from the city to the country, from romantic whirlwind to commitment (it was a devoted marriage, though not at all, to judge from the poems, a sexually faithful one), Millay appeared also to have moved into a quadrant of the brain that favored greater emotional detachment. Living among animals and plant life offered her distance, even when she was dealing with tragic themes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The title poem of her first book after the move to Austerlitz, *The Buck in the Snow*, initially recounts the death of a buck ("his wild blood scalding the snow") in six irregular lines, each ending with rhymes on "snow." Then the one-note music, relentless like death, opens up to accommodate the fragility of what remains:

> How strange a thing is death, bringing to his knees, bringing to his antlers
> The buck in the snow.
> How strange a thing,—a mile away by now, it may be,
> Under the heavy hemlocks that as the moments pass
> Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of snow—
> Life, looking out attentive from the eyes of the doe.

The assonance and consonance ("heavy hemlocks," "a little, letting fall"), the continued rhyme on "snow," all show Millay's years of apprenticeship in traditional forms. But the sureness of hand with which she combines this music with unrhymed lines and unscannable rhythms is the poem's true achievement. The padded feel of so much of Millay's metrical verse has disappeared; lines end when they need to. Freed from the tyranny of the iamb, Millay instinctively modernized her diction, and, in so doing, lowered the temperature of her sensibility. Life, as it looks out from the eyes of an animal, is "attentive," but not grief-stricken; snow falls, but not tears.

The loose correspondence between freer verse and a more detached treatment of subject matter persisted throughout Millay's life, although she continued heavily to favor her earlier, formal mode. In the posthumous *Mine the Harvest* of 1954, a poem called "Armenonville" demonstrates that even when writing about that least objective topic, human love, she could eschew both the coldness and the torment that were her mainstays for a tone of gentleness and mild amusement. The poem's more muted emotional effects seem at least partly the result of a liberation of technique. Two lovers sit at a café table near a lake in the Bois de Boulogne; the waiters leave them "blissfully alone." And then

> There swam across the lake, as I looked aside, avoiding
> Your eyes for a moment, there swam from under the pink and red begonias
> A small creature; I thought it was a water-rat; it swam very well,
> In complete silence, and making no ripples at all . . .

The tortured confessional poems of recent decades lead us to suspect that the water-rat is coming into view in order to symbolize something really ghastly in the lovers' relationship. But no, "I thought it was a water-rat,"—and so it is; and not only that, the rat swims very well. The long, enjambed lines, the prosaic rhythms, the reverence for the humblest of animals, fleetingly put one in mind of Marianne Moore, who (five years Millay's senior) would usually appear to inhabit another poetic planet. When, at the end of the poem, Millay returns her attention to her lover's conversation, "truly I did not know / Whether you had been asking or telling." Interestingly, as in most of her love poems, it is Millay and not her lover who loses attention first; but this time the competitor for her affections is a water-rat, and only for a moment. Its effortless progress, as liquid as her lines, serves as a (perhaps unintentional) emblem of the solitary freedom she had always sought in her poems—for herself, and for others.

Death, the final encroachment, came to Millay barely a year after that of her husband. Friends surmised that his sudden passing hastened hers, of a heart attack; in any case, in later years she had suffered from ill health, alcoholism, and depression. She had written some worthy elegies and meditations on mortality, finding consolation not in the Christian afterlife but in her own irrational defiance. The most moving of these poems, "Dirge Without Music," concludes,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

Poetry was not merely the expression of her defiance; it was life itself. In a letter to Edmund Wilson in 1946, after a nervous breakdown which had left her unable to write poetry for two years, she attributed even her silence to work she had written before, her war propaganda: ". . . [T]here is nothing on this earth which can so much get on the nerves of a good poet, as the writing of bad poetry . . . I was in the hospital a long time."

And poetry cured her too, or at least made life bearable; she recovered by memorizing long-dead masters. Her letter, for all its sorrow, sparkles with boasting:

> I have just finished learning by heart Matthew Arnold's *Scholar Gypsy* . . . I have also learned by heart *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Lamia* . . . I have learned by heart, of Shelley, not only *To the West Wind* . . . but also the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*—a devil to learn by heart. Anyway, I have them all now. And what evil thing can ever again even brush me with its wings?

Nothing more evil, for a poet, than to be forgotten—and Millay was a poet whose readership had once learned her by heart as well. How often in the letter she speaks of having "learned by heart"—probably an inevitable phrase from the love poet who implored years before, "Pity me that the heart is slow to learn / What the swift mind beholds at every turn." However limited the uses posterity may have for this minor poet, surely the swiftness and thoroughness with which she was unlearned by the critics at midcentury was not deserved. Falck doesn't reprint here "The Poet and His Book," a lament about the ephemerality of literary fame (and to heap irony upon irony, he was right not to—it's too long by half). But a few lines from it may underscore just how acutely the young Millay foresaw the dangers ahead:

Stranger, pause and look;
From the dust of ages
Lift this little book,
Turn the tattered pages,
Read me, do not let me die!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dusty answer: the case of Drieu La Rochelle

by Renee Winegarten

Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life.
—George Meredith, *Modern Love*

What precisely is the relationship between literature and painting? Certainly, writers have been inspired by painters, and painters by writers. Nowadays, however, the academic mode for interdisciplinary speculation goes much further: it offers a venturesome study that aims to show a close link between methods of writing and painting in the unlikely person of the poet, novelist, and publicist Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (1893-1945).[1] Still a highly controversial figure, perhaps Drieu is best known outside France for the film that Louis Malle adapted in 1963 from the novel *Le Feu Follet* (1931), about a self-destructive drug addict, transformed by the script into an alcoholic.

For some idea of Drieu's mature aesthetic responses, let us follow him on his visit to Germany in 1935, as an official guest of the Nazi establishment. By then in his early forties, he had ended his flirtation with the Surrealists, and had broken off his intimate literary and brothel-crawling friendship with Louis Aragon, one of the leading poetic lights of the Surrealist movement. In the previous year Drieu had published his *Socialisme Fasciste*. His German hosts took him to see the concentration camp at Dachau. What mightily impressed Drieu was the "remarkable comfort" of the place. Bernard-Henri Lévy, in the published text of his 1991 television film about the vagaries of modern French intellectuals, *Les Aventures de la Liberté*, cannot get over this blindness and crass indifference on Drieu's part: he makes it the focus of his unremitting indictment of the novelist. In what way, though, can Drieu's bland response to the Nazi concentration camp be distinguished from that of so many "useful idiots"—to use Lenin's crushing phrase—when faced with the Soviet penal system? All the same, where Drieu is concerned, there remains a sense of waste and niggling unease.

Could he have moved in another direction? He was an elegant dandy, a ladykiller, a man who could display acute sensibility and lucidity (notwithstanding his obtuseness in large areas), a penetrating observer of human conduct, especially his own. As a schoolboy of fifteen he had spent some time in England, where he was swept off his feet by Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*. Indeed, he knew English and English literature well: he translated D. H. Lawrence; he was friendly with Aldous Huxley and wrote about his work. Notoriously, he always followed English sartorial taste. Moreover, he had served as an interpreter with the United States Expeditionary Force in 1917. In contrast, he was not well versed in German.

1 *Drieu La Rochelle and the Picture Gallery Novel: French Modernism in the Interwar Years*, by Rima Drell Reck; Louisiana State University Press, 223 pages, $32.50.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Drieu went on to Moscow from Germany. It did not take him long to see through the bureaucracy, militarism, and uncontrolled despotism of the Soviet police state. He wondered how French liberal intellectuals could ignore Stalin's "Asiatic dogmatism," and he called them guilty men. Here they were, face to face with a flesh and blood hangman, and they worried about "the specter of Fascism," as he called it. Why did he not realize that his own choice was equally ghastly? As the Latin has it: those whom a god wishes to destroy, he first makes mad. Many reasons have been adduced for this kind of blinkered selective judgment, including self-conceit and weakness, rationalism and anti-rationalism, the desire to be modern and hatred of modernism.

One important element in Drieu was an aesthetic and moral current of emotional responses and notions concerning the decay and death of civilization. This current flows broadly from the nineteenth century, from Carlyle and Nietzsche, to name two of the equivocal forebears deeply admired by Drieu. Moreover, the modern mechanistic forms of destruction employed to such terrible effect in the holocaust of the 1914-18 War, in which he was wounded, left an indelible imprint on Drieu's sensibility. Surprising as it seems today, Drieu—just like Henry de Montherlant, another exponent of wartime heroism and comradeship—came and went at the Front more or less as it suited him.

The destructive power of the new machinery of war only confirmed in Drieu, as in so many others, the sense that a sick civilization had reached its end. Something new, "a new man," vital, healthy, strong, heroic, had to be created. The new must necessarily be superior to the old, and certainly it would not be found in outworn liberal parliamentary democracy but in some form of totalitarian regime. For totalitarianism was "the new fact" of the twentieth century, as Drieu was to define it. Even when, under the German Occupation, he finally came to grow disillusioned with Hitler, realizing at last that the Führer had no intention of fostering principles of Fascist "renewal" in France, Drieu's thoughts would tend to Communism rather than to General de Gaulle.

To return to Germany in 1935: the impact of the Nuremberg Rally on Drieu was immediate. He confessed to feeling intoxicated by "a kind of virile pleasure" (the sexual note is inescapable, as it is in his allusions to leadership, particularly in his novel *La Comédie de Charleroi*, published the previous year). At his first sight of Hitler, Drieu identified himself with the Führer, with his "simplicity" and, above all, his "strength." He felt that "the male and positive part" of his work was linked with Hitler's "strength" —any weakness in his own writings being plainly associated in his mind with what he recognized as his femininity. The torchlit procession, the flag-waving, the singing—the entire spectacle appeared to him "crushing in its beauty." He told his current mistress, Christiane Renault, socialite wife of the motor-car industrialist, that he had not experienced an "artistic emotion" to equal it since he had seen the Russian Ballet. "It is the most beautiful thing since the Acropolis," he declared.

Drieu's response to Hitler's masterly manipulation of politico-theatrical spectacle was thus rooted not only in the adoration of power and virile health and strength but also in a form of joyous aestheticism. His political commitment to Fascism, to the Parti Populaire Français led by the former Communist working-class demagogue Jacques Doriot (with whom Drieu became disillusioned when he discovered that Doriot was being subsidized by Mussolini), and his later collaboration with the Nazis during the Occupation—these were as much aesthetic as ideological in inspiration. Paul Sérant, in his invaluable study *Le Romantisme fasciste*, pointed to the aesthetic element in commitment to Fascism. It is an aspect that is often overlooked.

Ever since the serious revival of Drieu's work and literary reputation in the 1960s, a number of French critics have sought to ex-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

onerate him or, at the least, to play down his political "errors." They have concentrated instead upon his artistic merits and upon his value as an essential witness of his era. A kind of Olympian literary or cultural attitude that only the French seem to be able to carry off with aplomb comes into play here. Besides, the fact that Drieu committed suicide in 1945, after several unsuccessful attempts to do so, has endowed him with the legendary aura of the tragically self-destructive, misunderstood artist, an aura that once fascinated Alfred de Vigny in the young poet Chatterton, and that has continued to exert its spell ever since.

Doubtless, it had to come: a study that would concentrate upon Drieu's "aesthetic vision" in an attempt to separate it from his intellectual outlook in general and his commitment to Fascism in particular. That determination underlies the thesis of Rima Drell Reck's book on Drieu's art and artistry, a thesis argued with passionate intensity. The work is illustrated throughout by paintings from Bronzino to Magritte and Picasso, and it refers to much recent critical writing on art and literature. The author, a professor of comparative literature at the University of New Orleans, does not deny what she calls, with nice understatement, Drieu's "disastrous political engagements," to which she alludes in passing, having apparently written about them elsewhere. She acknowledges that his politics, "his spasms of literary antisemitism" or "his somewhat 'old-fashioned' antisemitism" (is there a newfangled variety?), and some of his attitudes toward women, are "exceedingly difficult to accept." However, she resolutely puts all this distasteful stuff to one side in her attempt to examine Drieu's "aesthetic vision" apart from these unfortunate vagaries or "aberrations" (as an anonymous critic in *The Times Literary Supplement* once airily called them).

The sad fact remains that Drieu's "aesthetic vision" cannot really be separated from his political commitment: the two elements were interconnected and became inextricably fused. Very loosely, there would appear to be at least two periods in Drieu's political development, although he was always deeply influenced by thinkers on the Right, by "the anti-Modern, from [Joseph] de Maistre to Péguy," as he once expressed it, by opponents of capitalism and of liberal parliamentary democracy. One period falls before the notorious right-wing riots of February 6, 1934, which almost overthrew the Third Republic; and the other after that watershed, when he announced that he was a Fascist.

According to his friend Emmanuel Berl, in the early 1920s Drieu had shown no trace of anti-Semitism. Drieu thought well of his schoolfellow André Jeramec, killed while fighting for France in the 1914-18 War, whose sister, Colette, became his first wife. Although the Jeramecs were Catholics (Colette did not learn about her Jewish origin until she was fourteen), Drieu always regarded them and their wealthy father, who committed suicide, as Jews. Father and daughter were to be caricatured in Drieu's satirical novel *Gilles* (1939), whose villainess is Rachel, the nasty little foreign Communist vamp, called "une affreuse juive" in the Baudelairean manner.

During the German Occupation, Drieu was to intercede for Colette and others, but he remained silent about the notorious raid carried out by the French *milice* in July 1942 (known to history as "la rafle du Vél' d'Hiv") which sent Jewish families to the death camps. This silence is confirmed in a recent biography of Drieu's friend and onetime lover, Victoria Ocampo, the celebrated Argentinian patron of the arts, who did not share his political opinions. [2] In Bernard-Henri Lévy's view (supported by chapter and verse), Drieu doubtless heard talk about the Final Solution from prominent German figures with whom he socialized. In his posthumously published diaries, however, Drieu made no comment.

In the important 1942 preface to his novel *Gilles*, replying to his critics, Drieu declared:

2 *Victoria Ocampo*, by Laura Ayerza de Castilho and Odile Felgine; Criterion (Paris), 343 pages, FF 125.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"They did not take the trouble to see the unity of views beneath the diversity of means of expression, chiefly between my novels and my political essays." He went on: "Some artists think that I have been too concerned with politics in my work and my life. But I have been concerned with everything and with that [politics] also. A great deal of that, because there is a great deal of that in the life of men, at all times, and because all the rest is tied to that." Despite the clumsily chatty tone, what could be clearer? Professor Reck would have us believe that Drieu cared about art, literature, Paris, and politics "in that order." He himself contradicts her in the preface to *Gilles.*

Certainly, there was a time when Drieu put literature first, but it did not endure. If it had, his story might possibly be an entirely different one. As with his politics so with his art, there are very roughly two periods in Drieu's development. From an aesthetic point of view, the division falls around 1925-29, when he broke with Surrealism, the chief avant-garde literary and artistic movement of the interwar years.

What is his real criticism of the Surrealists in the three open letters addressed to them that he published in 1925, 1927, and 1929? It is that they have become salon revolutionaries who think that dreams and violent words are the same thing as revolutionary action. Worse still, they have deceived him personally by their commitment to Communism. "Surrealism was revelation—not revolution," he insisted. Wrongly, the Surrealists have abandoned art and artistic independence for politics. How ironic it now seems: at that moment Drieu loudly proclaimed that an intellectual should not join a party. Emmanuel Berl, in his *Mort de la Pensée Bourgeoise* (1929), favoring the revolutionary stance of Malraux, saw Drieu's solution then as an endorsement of the theory of art for art's sake.

By the time that Drieu broke with the Surrealists, he regarded Surrealist art—indeed, all modern art—as a form of decadence. In his novel *Gilles* he was to pillory the Surrealist panjandrum, André Breton, as Caël, the bullying charlatan, and his former friend Louis Aragon as Cyrille Galant, the sexual decadent. Picasso (to whose work Drieu had been introduced by Aragon) was viewed as purely destructive. He, like Matisse and Léger, would be charged with decadence. Drieu's moment of aesthetic modernism was therefore associated with his Surrealistic period. Afterward, he regarded modern art as just one more form of the decadence that was undermining everything. Paradoxically, Drieu's "modernism" becomes anti-modernism.

According to Professor Reck, the word "decadence" has fostered a great deal of misguided critical commentary on Drieu's work. There is, however, no avoiding it, for the idea of decadence is central to both his artistic and his political outlook. He was obsessed by decadence, dreaded it, saw it everywhere, both outside and inside himself. As Frédéric Grover, the distinguished authority on Drieu, once pointed out: Drieu denounced the horror of contemporary civilization, finding decadence in every human activity: religion, art, sex, war, and government. For Drieu, all forms of decadence merge in sexual decadence. This was a theme on which he was an expert, through his two unsuccessful marriages to wealthy young women; his various plans to marry heiresses; his numerous mistresses, including the wife of a United States diplomat; and, throughout his life, his unbroken association with prostitutes.

In Drieu, decadence grows from being a kind of nasty hidden disease whose symptoms are difficult to detect (*Genève ou Moscou?*, 1928) until it turns into "a crushing fact" (the 1942 preface to *Gilles*). In a brilliant study, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet*, Richard Gilman probed what is really the destiny of an extraordinarily potent metaphor. Like many of his contemporaries, the young Drieu was fed on the idea of decadence, not only through the humiliating defeats of 1870 and after, and the widespread obsession with the low French birthrate, but also through his read-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing of the French Romantics and their heirs.

What Drieu hated, besides the decadence he acknowledged in himself, was the decadence of others: the supposed materialistic outlook of Americans; the mediocre aspirations of the inferior bourgeoisie; democracy (which favored the mindless herd and, especially, the Jews); the utilitarianism of modern industrial society founded on money instead of on religious faith and on the human relationships that had supposedly prevailed in the agricultural society of the Middle Ages. Drieu was always harping on the virtues of the Middle Ages, boring Victoria Ocampo on this theme, virtues extolled by Carlyle and others. It is curious that admirers of the relations between nobleman and serf always seem to have imagined themselves as aristocrats rather than in the place of those whose existence was nasty, brutish, and short. In fine, Drieu was haunted by decadence as an aesthetic, moral, and political "fact" after the manner of his master, Nietzsche, who confessed to being more concerned with this problem than with any other.

It would be difficult to overstate the theme of decadence in the ethos of writers up to 1945: Drieu was simply an extreme example of its deleterious effects. What nobody seems to have asked—presumably because they were blinded by the metaphor of decadence and by the myth of social health and heroism—was "Who profits from this notion?" Today, it seems only too clear that ideologists of the extreme Left and Right used it and gained immensely from it, by ceaselessly repeating the refrain of the decay of Western civilization and pillorying its values. For Drieu, nothing remained for the individual but to try to create something new "in order not to die." Having rejected various forms of "renewal" on offer, including the royalism of Charles Maurras and Soviet Communism (because he said he could never be a materialist), he threw himself into Fascism. Why did the solution have to be one of this extreme nature? It was because, in the face of nothingness and decay, totalitarianism appeared to him to be "the new fact" of the twentieth century.

The pressure of left- and right-wing propaganda about bourgeois decadence and the decay of corrupt democratic regimes (hardly contradicted in France by the scandals of the 1930s) impelled Drieu toward political commitment, despite his early advocacy of artistic independence. In his third letter to the Surrealists, he said that he had been accused of "not liking to commit myself." The more uncertain he was, the more he felt the need for political commitment. Toward the end of his life he said that he settled for an answer in order to stop vacillating. "To live is first of all to commit oneself," thinks Gilles, who wants to dirty his hands along with the rest of humanity. Drieu even spoke of "the fall into a political destiny" in *Socialisme Fasciste*. In October 1937, he explained to Victoria Ocampo how "From the moment that I am not a 'Communist,' that I am an anti-Communist, I am a Fascist. From the moment I bring grist to the mill of Fascism, I might just as well do it unreservedly." Not long before he took his own life, he wrote of his regrets: "But I was set on committing myself, more than anything I was afraid of being an intellectual in his ivory tower." Doubtless, he was far from alone in dreading such a fate. It is not difficult to see how much Sartre learned from Drieu, despite his deep loathing of the man and his actions.

In June 1940, Drieu could have left for England: he thought of taking this course, but he did not pursue it. Under the Nazi Occupation he was not obliged to become editor of the leading intellectual magazine, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*; indeed, it is said that his friend Otto Abetz, now German ambassador, advised him against compromising himself unnecessarily (though Dominique Desanti offers a different version of Abetz's conduct in her biography of Drieu). It is now known that André Malraux, who remained Drieu's friend throughout the Occupation, would have taken the author of *Gilles*—under an assumed name

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

—into the Alsace-Lorraine brigade which he led to victory. Drieu could have fled to Switzerland or Denmark, along with so many others. His last nihilistic novel, *Les Chiens de paille* (1944), whose protagonist despises Communists, Fascists, Gaullists, nationalists, as well as Jews, gives a good idea of Drieu's despairing state of mind as he sought refuge in Oriental mysticism.

Drieu wrote out of what was negative in himself. He recognized what he called in Franglais his penchant for "self-dénigrement," and his masochism. In a remarkable discussion about Drieu with Frédéric Grover in 1959 (published in *La Revue des Lettres Modernes* in 1972), André Malraux spoke of this tendency in his friend. According to Malraux, Drieu was far from being the negative personage he projected in his writings. On the contrary, claimed Malraux, he dominated any gathering of leading intellectuals by his "astonishing presence" and charisma. It would seem to be essential to any discussion of Drieu's work and attitudes to try to embrace his psychological make-up and its effect on his precarious balancing act between dreams, art, and action.

None of this, however, is to be found in Professor Reck's book, so that her work seems ill balanced. The author pursues single-mindedly the idea of examining in detail Drieu's views on art, which have been largely neglected. She was struck by the evocative back cover of Dominique Desanti's biography of Drieu, where the head of Watteau's *Gilles* (a painting now known as *Pierrot, formerly Gilles*) is juxtaposed with that of Drieu himself. In the blurb there, the physical resemblance between the two is mentioned as well as Drieu's inclination to treat Watteau's *Gilles* as "a kind of fetish." This sends the reader back to Drieu's discussion of the picture in his long essay on Romanticism, first published in 1941 and reprinted in Frédéric Grover's collection of Drieu's critical writings.

Drieu's argument in that essay is not peculiar to his concept of pictorial art: it is, in essence, quite familiar from other writings of his about general modern decay, including his articles on circus, music hall, and theater, explored by Professor Reck. Up to 1750, Drieu asserts, man is still a solid being, as depicted by Watteau. Indeed, Drieu even finds assurance in Watteau, one of the most mysterious and enigmatic of eighteenth-century painters. What vigor, health, certainty, equilibrium, are to be found in Watteau's *Gilles!* exclaims Drieu, who invites us to compare this figure with the man of 1830, completely ravaged by the rationalism of the Enlightenment and all its attendant ills. The mysticism of the Middle Ages (Drieu's King Charles's head or, as the French say, Ingres's violin) has not entirely departed from Watteau's *Gilles*, who still shows signs of a virility that was soon to depart. In short, Drieu's account of Watteau's painting cannot be separated from his views on universal modern decadence, views which lie at the core of his political stance also.

Furthermore, Drieu contrasts Watteau's *Gilles* with "one of the great portraits at the beginning of the nineteenth century by David or Ingres," in order to underline his dubious point about the awful decline into materialism and money (although he himself required a great deal of filthy lucre in order to live and to travel in fine style). Without specifying any particular picture, Drieu speaks of the expression of doubt or defiance, the pre-eminence given to reason, the loss of the sense of the divine in such portraits.

By a daring leap of her own, Professor Reck takes Ingres's portrait of Monsieur Bertin, and declares that it is the "major model" for Drieu's characterization of Jules Chanteau, the Radical leader, in his novel *Gilles*. Manet once said that Ingres made Monsieur Bertin "the Buddha of the bourgeoisie, satiated, rich, triumphant." Can this really be said of Chanteau, the coarse parliamentary intriguer, the peasant turned intellectual, who hated the bourgeoisie of Left and Right? This was the flatulent demagogue whose party allowed the invasion and perversion of a once powerful land by millions of foreigners, Jews, Annamites, Negroes—a refrain of Drieu's that is still

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

going strong among French politicians today, some of whom might have been expected to know better. The connection offered by Professor Reck is suggestive and dazzling, but it is not convincing. She boldly maintains that Drieu as a novelist employs methods of modern art like collage; she describes his words and literary techniques in terms of the techniques of painting, making striking intuitive links where no connection based on solid evidence is adduced.

To take but one example of her method: Drieu's alter ego, Gilles, recalling a moment of epiphany during the fighting in Champagne (in 1914), notices a primrose ("primevère" in French) in the grass amid the terrible wreckage of battle: it was like "a little girl" who falls prey to a satyr, a brutish creature lying in wait to tear her apart. In Professor Reck's translation, the little girl has become "a young girl," because this change facilitates her fanciful interpretation. In her highly imaginative view, "the word *primevère* (primrose) fuses with the Italian *primavera* (springtime) and the figure of Flora, the goddess of spring . . . from Botticelli's *Primavera* in the Uffizi appears." However, that is not all.

A further large development ensues as the Renaissance painter's subject has suddenly been transmuted into that of the French novelist: "In Drieu's *Primavera*, glowing and evanescent, for a rare moment the picture gallery comes out to meet the trenches." An illustration of Botticelli's *Primavera* is included among the rest. And all of this takes flight because one word in French is similar in appearance and sound to another in Italian (hardly surprising since both have a Latin origin), and because that word, "primevère," has gaily led Professor Reck to Botticelli's masterpiece. Yet what has become of Drieu's satyr? There is no satyr in Botticelli's painting, which, unlike the passage in Drieu's novel, does not convey an image of rape and of the cruel destruction of innocence and beauty.

The painterly discussion of Drieu's prose and the illustrations provided often seem to bear little relevance to the literary work itself. If Gilles's guardian and tutor, Carentan, the decrepit reactionary writer on world religions, works in a disordered study full of books and religious images, we are sent to Manet's 1868 portrait of Emile Zola. In Manet's picture, though, the immaculately suited young novelist sits among books and carefully chosen objects and prints (including Manet's *Olympia*), works that reflect not only Zola's own concerns but his outspoken defense of Manet in 1863. Carentan's study is a dusty mess: Drieu alludes to Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and thus to the accumulation of useless knowledge. Zola's ordered study reveals the novelist's active commitment to new art at that time, and it conveys Manet's delicate compliment to the writer. The connection made between the passage in Drieu's novel and Manet's portrait of Zola looks fanciful in the extreme.

The weak epilogue to *Gilles*, which sends the protagonist to fight for Franco during the Spanish Civil War (as Drieu did not), is seen as a challenge to Picasso and his *Guernica*, characterized by Professor Reck solely as his "manifesto for the Republican cause." Picasso's terrifying picture was surely also a cry of grief and outrage at the bombing of the ancient sacred city of the Basques by German and Italian planes. It remains a shattering depiction of the destruction and savagery of war, a modern massacre of the innocents. Far more than a challenge to Picasso, Drieu's epilogue is a challenge to André Malraux, to *L'Espoir* and its intellectual discussions, and to his friend's much publicized active role on the Republican side in the early days of the Spanish Civil War.

There is little doubt that Drieu loved paintings: he visited art galleries and museums throughout his life; he enjoyed writing about his favorite works. His last unfinished novel, *Mémoires de Dirk Raspe*, which was published posthumously, drew inspiration from the life of Van Gogh. Yet a keen interest in the visual arts was then—and remains—an essential and pleasurable part of everyone's cultural heritage. "France is a land of painters where Daumier has as much

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of a claim as Delacroix," said Drieu, insisting on the importance of satirical art after the manner of Daumier. At the same time, he characteristically bemoaned the limitations of his own satire of decadent modern French life when compared with the broad scope of Malraux's international themes, treated in more colorful style, as it were after Delacroix. Writers of his own era, from Proust to Breton and Malraux, devoted stimulating pages to painting. Drieu's interest was by no means unique, and his actual discussion of art occupies less space than that of, say, Malraux.

If there is a connection to be made between literary and painterly techniques—and so far I am not convinced that there is—it would have to be examined with the most scrupulous tact, with strict reference to the available evidence (and no straying beyond it), evidence considered in relation to the writer's imagination and mental outlook as a whole. Drieu stressed the unity of his work, and there is no reason to doubt his own word in this regard. Whatever one may think of him as a human being or as a talent, he is so candid a representative of the negative and nihilistic aspects of his age that he merits no less than critical rigor tempered with justice.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by Louis Simpson, John Hollander & Harvey Shapiro*

A bayman

He walks backward across the deck
pulling the rake, working it up and down,
then brings up the rakehead
and empties it on the cullrack.

This gray rubber ball
is a sea cucumber. And this,
a scungili—they eat the seed clams,
next year's catch, shell and all.
A square blue bottle, medicinal,
some Yakov's magic elixir.
He has a collection of old bottles,
and clay pipes, just the bowls,
dropped in the bay by Englishmen
two hundred years ago.

There are three littleneck clams
and a cherrystone. He puts the "necks"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in a red net bag. The cherrystone
on the deck, to one side.

A bag of littlenecks, one hundred pounds,
fetches sixty-five dollars in today's market.
Not exactly the wealth of the Indies.
And the rake handle sections get pitted
and have to be replaced,
and the rakehead twice a year.

Five years ago, many of the guys
left the bay—they couldn't make a living.
But he stuck it out. He's been a bayman
twenty-seven years, taking time out
for the army and a tour in Vietnam.
He couldn't wait to get back to the bay.

His wife understands—he couldn't do it
without her. Rita has a part-time job.
They own the house, and never buy anything
on time . . . never had a new car.
You have to stay away from monthly payments.
There are months, in winter, you don't catch
anything.

It can get pretty hairy
when the temperature goes down
and there's a wind from the northwest.

The gulls circle squawking.
One will light and stand there all day,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but not if there's a second person.
It's not that they're anti-social,
but they don't like dealing with the public.

One winter he lent a hand
in his brother's catering business
when one of the drivers took sick.
The longest two weeks of his life.

Over there is Blue Point, where the oysters
used to be. The salinity killed them.
Clams too are harder to find.

But to spend all your time figuring
how to make more money . . .
What for?

—*Louis Simpson*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cissy's song

The child writes her verses. Bookish snow
Falling beyond her windowpane
Dances elusively: dropping rain
In remembered summer of short ago
Played no descending games, and so
She scribbles away as much for the sake
Of remembered cadence, as for the ache
Of seeing one last falling leaf
Summer had held in unyielding fief,
A motif she will take:
"One last flake that refuses to linger
Pirouettes down on my outstretched finger."

Again she picks up her pen. The snow
Inscribed behind her windowpane
Dances allusively: winter's reign
Over remembrances cannot slow
The backward-running streams that flow
Up from the brimming past to creep
Into the present, where from deep
In their undreaming sleep, they make
Figures of innocence jingle and shake
And leave in their wake
One last leaf
It refuses to linger,
And pirouettes down on her outstretched finger.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She turns to her desk, at a time of no
Snow: summoned up on her windowpane,
Returning in moments of refrain,
As if with her breath, words come and go
With just enough childish warmth to break
The cold white heart of a frozen lake
Her thoughts are lost in the cold of time
But two last lines, glittering with rime
Fifty years afterward startle awake
One last flake,
One last flake that refuses to linger
Pirouettes down on my outstretched finger.

—*John Hollander*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Meditation on a Brooklyn bench

I was by myself on the promenade,
facing the massive city. Pleasure craft
cut white trails in the water.
The lady with the lamp dim green
in the dim green afternoon.
A Circle Line boat, looking sprightly,
hurrying up river toward the Bridge,
and the old paddle steamer from
the South Street Seaport meandering
past Battery. The kind of day you
needn't take responsibility for, sitting
in the shade, like an elderly citizen,
wondering where it all went—the wife
and kids, the years of work. Covered over
by the waters of the East River. Not a river,
a tidal basin, and the tide coming in now,
full force, dangerous, looking for me.

—*Harvey Shapiro*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When the spirit

When the spirit begins to shut down,
it is real enough. No abstract entity then.
No useful fiction. You can hear it
banging down the window, saying
this shop is closed. And you know
it could mean forever. Where will your
legs carry you then, and of what
use to you your eyes?

—*Harvey Shapiro*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

Egon Petri: the musician as virtuoso

by Samuel Lipman

As is the case with so many of yesterday's great performing musicians, the survival of the playing of the once vastly admired Dutch pianist Egon Petri (1881-1962) has been assured by the reissue of some of his many recordings and by their easy availability, in the past on LP and now on CD. In the 1970s, there was an EMI release in Japan[1] of several of Petri's many 78-RPM pre-World War II commercial recordings, most of them originally issued on the English Columbia label and then released in due course on American Columbia. In the early 1950s, Petri recorded the Beethoven "Hammerklavier" Sonata for American Columbia;[2] later in the 1950s, he also made several LP recordings for Westminster, including one of the monumental *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*[3] of Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), the Italo-German pianist-composer and Petri's revered teacher. Finally, a small handful of Petri's students and admirers were able, with touching dedication, to arrange for the LP issue in the 1970s and 1980s of a number of live performances, including the "Hammerklavier,"[4] from the very last years of his life.

Now Pearl, the invaluable English label which has managed to make available excellent transfers of countless treasures of pre-World War II 78-RPM recordings, has brought out two Petri CDs, with the promise of more to come. The first to appear (in 1989) was a disc containing Petri commercial recordings from the 1930s of music composed or arranged by Busoni, along with the complete recordings of Busoni himself.[5] Late in 1991, Pearl issued what it calls "Volume I" of Petri's playing, including almost all that was on the earlier EMI (Japan) LP disc, along with live performances taken from a Mills College recital in 1948, and from Petri's Oakland, California, living room in 1951.[6] Taken together, these two Pearl CDs, though hardly amounting to a complete edition of the Petri recordings —there are surely enough of his 78-RPM performances to make up another two CDs— provide material for the beginnings of an adequate conspectus of the pianist's musical personality and pianistic achievement.

First a word about Petri's life and career. Born in Germany, he was the son of the violinist Henri Petri. The young Petri studied both piano and violin, and was a member

1 EMI (Japan) *Great Recordings of the Century* GR-2181.

2 Columbia LP ML 4479. This recording was reissued in 1977 by Columbia as P 14152.

3 Westminster 18844. This LP also includes four short Busoni transcriptions of Bach, as well as four transcriptions by Petri himself, three of which are of music by Bach, the other of music by Buxtehude. This LP was available in the Westminster "Collectors Series" as W-9347.

4 Dell'Arte DA 9016.

5 Pearl GEMM CD 9347.

6 Pearl GEMM CD 9916.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of his father's string quartet. Under Busoni's guidance, he concentrated on the piano, and from World War I on was involved in the completion of Busoni's great edition of the keyboard works of Bach. After Busoni's death, Petri toured extensively in Europe and Russia. He taught in Berlin at the Hochschule für Musik from 1921 to 1926. During the 1930s, he lived, taught, and played in Poland, but in 1938 he settled in America, where he taught at Cornell from 1940 to 1946. From 1947 to 1957 he taught at Mills, then in its musical golden age, with Darius Milhaud and later Leon Kirchner on the composition faculty, and the Budapest Quartet in residence each summer. As the recorded evidence attests, he played frequently in public until close to his death. In a lifetime of teaching, his many students included Grant Johannesen (a great authority on nineteenth-century French piano music), Earl Wild (one of the most brilliant virtuosos of our time), John Ogdon (the richly versatile but sadly short-lived English pianist), Menahem Pressler (a co-founder of the Beaux Arts Trio), and Alexander Zakin (for many years Isaac Stern's redoubtable accompanist).

Petri was a remarkable man, both as a wit and as an artist. I was fortunate enough to witness both his wit and his art in northern California just after he came to Mills. In late 1948, Alexander Libermann, my then piano teacher, brought me to play for Petri, whose assistant he had been in the 1920s in Berlin. I was then fourteen, already a former child prodigy and the victim of very poor technical training from Libermann's predecessor. Though I had been successful as a prodigy in the sophisticated musical world of San Francisco, and though I had already played a concerto with Pierre Monteux, I was hardly prepared for Petri and the aura of intellectual musicianship which surrounded him. He spoke elegant, precise English, even though it was not his native tongue; among the other languages he spoke, as I was later to find out, were German, Polish, and, of course, Dutch. As I played for him in his beautiful living room, overlooking San Francisco Bay and furnished with two splendid Steinway grands, and then later as he talked to my mother and to me, he continually cracked jokes with Libermann. The two of them found the jokes uproarious; unfortunately for my mother and me, the jokes were in a strange-sounding language that proved to be Polish, and was therefore incomprehensible to us. This first time I played for him, he said little about my playing, only complimenting Libermann's teaching.

But in the following years I played for him several times more, and then I found that, like all great musicians, he possessed a remarkable ear. It was discomforting enough to me—for it reflected badly on my teacher—that Petri found wrong-read notes and rhythmic errors in my playing of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt. What was much worse was that he found these fundamental mistakes in my playing of the Ravel *Sonatine*, a work written between 1903 and 1905, when Petri was already an adult; furthermore, I am sure that it was a work that he had never himself played. So sharp is my memory of Petri's many corrections that I no longer remember what he had to say about the musical content of my playing; my guess is that he was much less interested, at least as far as I was concerned, with artistic expression than with textual accuracy.

After the very early 1950s, I no longer played for him, and I only heard his opinions of my playing from my teacher; of these opinions I only remember his objecting strenuously and repeatedly to my mannerism of sometimes lifting my left leg a few inches from the floor while I was playing; Petri suggested, or so Libermann told me, that in my leg I must have a piece of bone from the rear leg of a dog. I need not say that this was hardly a pleasurable manifestation of Petri's wit. Much more entertaining (at least to me) were the stories Libermann told me of his calling the young people he worked with "stupils," as a combination of "stupid" and "pupil," or of Petri's once telling a pupil who came early to a lesson: "Don't come early again; when you come

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

late you waste your time, but when you come early you waste mine."

More constructively important to me than any personal contact with Petri was my hearing him play many recitals at Mills College. In these concerts, I remember his playing the Busoni transcriptions of Bach, Beethoven sonatas—in particular the "Hammerklavier" and the opus 111—and numerous Liszt transcriptions, including many of Schubert *Lieder*. He had a beautiful piano sound, and an imposing, always straightforward way of demonstrating, rather than interpreting, the works he programmed. His chief virtue as an artist—in addition, of course, to the bright and pellucid sound he drew from the instrument—was his manifest honesty: there was no artifice in his playing, no attempt to substitute what Virgil Thomson called the "wow" technique for the musical values plainly contained in the written notes.

There could be no doubt that Petri was a big pianist, and there also could be no doubt that he was equally happy playing the great chords of Busoni and Liszt transcriptions and the extended quiet sections in the slow movements of Beethoven sonatas. There was also in his playing of lyrical passages—doubtless as a result of his unfailingly direct approach—something of a jerky quality, as if he never allowed the melodic line to fall quite naturally. By comparison with the very artful recordings (and some live performances, too) of Vladimir Horowitz and Arthur Rubinstein that I had heard, Petri failed to make the subtle adjustments in melodic declamation and harmonic pulse, often called rubato, that allow music to sound beguiling and expressive to ears accustomed to what might very loosely be called Russian piano-playing. Then too, I must add that I was often put off Petri's playing by his frequently messy, often heedless execution of difficult technical passages; I never had the feeling that he couldn't *play* these passages, just that he hadn't troubled to *practice* them sufficiently.

Now, as I listen to his recordings forty and more years later, I find myself both of the same mind about Petri as I was in my teens, but also, in addition, strangely reverent toward his persona, not as a man, but as a musician. The commercial recordings made when Petri was in his fifties, of course, are much more immaculate than his live playing captured on tape when he was about eighty. And yet the essential lineaments of Petri's playing are the same in the best recorded takes of the 1930s as they are in Petri's live playing as I heard it around 1950, and as we can hear it on the posthumous releases of his live playing toward the close of his life.

The two Pearl CDs, it seems to me, have some of the best of Petri that has been available in the last few decades. On the Pearl disc he shares with Busoni are to be found—in addition to Busoni's remarkably delicate, fleet, and introspective playing of Chopin and Liszt—Petri's sensitive and communicative performances of the still little-played Busoni original piano music and several rare transcriptions. The very first of Petri's recordings on this CD is of the Busoni *Carmen Fantasy*. Here, in a piece both familiar because of the famous passages Busoni has chosen to elaborate and unfamiliar because of the spooky treatment he has accorded this well-known music, Petri displays both his great virtues and his palpable defects. In the very difficult *Carmen Fantasy*, Petri leaves no doubt that he has a huge technique, and that he has a rare gift for *propounding* melody—as if melody were a kind of constitutional principle, and Petri were the tribune of the law. Elsewhere in the Busoni pieces, Petri shows them appealingly as serious, wonderfully thought-through works that have yet, perhaps for reasons of their very seriousness, to find their audience.

Yet at the same time, the listener to this Busoni-Petri CD is always conscious that, as far as Petri is concerned, not every demanding note, not every brilliant passage, not every technical challenge, has been fully worked through. Here as elsewhere in Petri's recorded oeuvre—as in his live con-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

certs—the pianist gives the impression that there are more important things than easy, comfortable execution; what counts is that the performer is on top of the music, and the very expression "on top" allows for a good deal of valuable undergrowth—what Monteux used to call "zee leetle note[s]"—being crushed or at least badly bruised. In *The Red Indian Diary*, Book I, the *Fantasia after Music by Bach*, *All'Italia!*, the Sonatina *ad usum infantis*, a transcription of the serenade from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and Busoni's arrangement for piano and orchestra of Liszt's solo piano *Spanish Rhapsody*, Petri plays the thoughtful music with high seriousness, and the brilliant music with a mostly happy disregard for merely perfect execution. At the end, our verdict on Petri service to Busoni as a composer is that both Petri and Busoni came from a better musical world than ours, a world in which the music, not the performer's personality, was the thing.

The second Pearl CD, devoted to Petri's playing of works by composers other than Busoni, gives much the same impression of his playing. Here are recordings, from the decade after 1929, of the delectable Sgambati transcription of the sublimely restrained "Melodie" from Gluck's *Orphée*, his own charming arrangement of several menuets from the *Little Piano Book* Bach made for his son Wilhelm Friedemann, the Beethoven Sonata opus 78, the Brahms *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*, three Liszt etudes (*Un sospiro*, *Gnomenreigen*, and *Mazeppa*), a Liszt transcription of the waltzes from Gounod's *Faust*, three Liszt transcriptions of Schubert—the waltz-chain *Soirée de Vienne* no. 6 and, from a 1948 recital recording, the songs *Liebesbotschaft* and *Die Forelle*—and a 1951 living-room performance of the Bach *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*.

This is all quintessential Petri repertory, by turns serious and virtuoso, weighty and brilliant. It is true that Petri's way of playing melodies and harmonic progressions, as I mentioned earlier, can often strike a listener as slightly unnatural; he has a way of hurrying over the bar line, as if he is fully confident of the listener's ability to comprehend the music without every melodic and harmonic resolution being underlined by all-too-palpable pauses just before the resolution is allowed to arrive. Once again, the playing is marked by massive technical energy, and a remarkable ability to let the melody sing out, regardless of the technical complications the often thick piano-writing puts in the performer's way. There is much delicacy in his playing as well, particularly in the Gluck, the Bach menuets, and the Schubert song transcriptions. On these recordings, as in his concerts, Petri had an extraordinary piano-tone, always clear, strong, and bell-like; indeed, his characteristic sound now seems to me to be, along with the very different sounds of Horowitz and Rubinstein, the defining character of the Steinway piano, surely the greatest musical instrument of the modern era—i.e., the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Curiously, some of the very best Petri playing on disc is to be heard in the 1951 living-room recording (made by the composer and Petri student Lee Hoiby) of the Bach *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*, played in the Busoni edition. The recording was evidently made on the spur of the moment, and Petri's piano does not even have the lid up; as Petri begins to play, he says, in a voice laden with mock-irritation, "I do all this under compulsion." Compulsion or no, this is Bach playing of a sweep and magnificence, enriched by Busoni's editorial interventions, unmatched today. As always with Petri, his technique is commanding, but on this occasion his technique is also more than usually neat. At Petri's hands, the famous rolled chords in the *Fantasy* seem like a force of nature. He makes the *Fugue* crystal-clear and, as Bach fugues should be but so rarely are, inexorable. Here is Bach presented not as an ineffable contrapuntalist but as a god-like titan; here is Bach conceived as the all-powerful father of our entire music.

Another example, unfortunately no longer available, of Petri's wonderful playing of large-scale Bach can be heard on a record-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing of the Bach-Busoni *Chaconne* made for American Columbia in 1945.[7] This work, so central to our musical tradition, is in these fastidious times only played on the solo violin for which it was originally written. But for much of the past century—before the cult of a spurious authenticity began to rule our musical roost—the *Chaconne* was heard mostly in transcription. In the 1920s and 1930s, there was a vogue for an orchestral arrangement by Stokowski. In the main, however, the work owed its survival to the piano. There are two major piano transcriptions of it. The first is that of Brahms, who made of the violin text a work for left hand alone, thus substituting the difficulties and limitations entailed by playing the piano with but one hand for those of the violin. The second, and very much the better known, is the transcription made by Busoni. It is clear that Busoni's intention was to fulfill (as he saw it) Bach's compositional conception; plainly Busoni intended to make manifest not what Bach *wrote* but what Bach *thought*. Of course the result is not baroque but late-romantic. It is fashionable now to cut Bach down to what might be called his temporal size; it was Busoni's achievement to expand Bach from the notes he wrote to what he means to music, not just for his time, not just for ours, but *sub specie aeternitatis*. Petri's playing of this grandiose (in the best sense) music is simple and unaffected; all he has to contribute to Bach (and to Busoni) is his honesty. In listening to this beautiful recording, one feels that, in this case at least, honesty is enough.

For many the summit of Petri's art is to be found in his playing of the mighty Beethoven "Hammerklavier." I am not sure that I can agree. There is indeed, in his realization of this grizzly bear of a piano piece, much emotional and pianistic integrity; there is also an overall hasty quality

7 The original 78-RPM issue of this performance was on Columbia MX 313, and it was briefly reissued around 1950 on an LP as Columbia ML 2049. My own copy is on a 1970s LP, International Piano Library IPL 104.

ART CRITICISM

To the Rescue of Art

Twenty-Six Essays

BY RUDOLF ARNHEIM

In these never before published essays, Arnheim argues that recent fashionable attitudes and theories about art are undermining the foundation of artistic achievement itself. The essays are written in his familiar, careful, and solidly supported manner, but under present circumstances they amount to a call to arms.

$16.00 paper, $38.00 cloth, 258 pages, illustrated

Barnett Newman

Selected Writings and Interviews

Edited by John P. O'Neill
Introduction by Richard Schiff
New in paperback

"Should be read not only by fans of Newman's art, but by anyone who is interested in the cultural affairs of this century."

—Yve-Alain Bois, *Art in America*

$15.95 paper, 362 pages, illustrated

At bookstores or order 1-800-822-6657. Visa/MasterCard.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

BERKELEY LOS ANGELES NEW YORK OXFORD

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(both in the work's innumerable fast passages and in the long, contemplative slow movement), a particular intensification of Petri's usual matter-of-fact approach, as if here at least, in this most clotted of Beethoven's writings, even Petri's gifts of musical explication and proclamation are challenged. Certainly Petri's Columbia "Hammerklavier" is vastly superior to Schnabel's ill-considered 1935 recording, in which the pianist was engulfed by the music's technical demands. Of the recordings of this work in the past, the best pianistically still seems to me Solomon's 1952 recording.[8] Here the virtuosity, always fully under control, is breathtaking, and is allied to an extraordinary musical sensitivity, specially welcome in a work written on this massive scale; it must be said, however, that even when measured against Solomon's wonderful pianism, Petri's playing of the slow movement, for all of its straightforwardness, manages to hint at profound simplicities uncommunicated by Solomon.

It is only fitting that any consideration of Petri's achievement as a great pianist should end with his remarkable performance of Busoni's *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* (1910-12). This Bach-based work, written by Busoni in three versions for solo piano, and in a fourth for two pianos, comprises five parts: a prelude on the chorale *Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr* ("Glory to God Alone in the Heavens"), and four three-part fugues, based on the uncompleted final fugue from Contrapunctus no. 19 of Bach's *The Art of Fugue*; between the final two fugues are interposed an intermezzo, three variations, and a cadenza, each based on the four fugue-subjects. In this huge work are to be found the full union of the twin loves of Busoni's life: Bach and the piano. In Petri's performance of the *Fantasia* are to be found his own reverence for Busoni and for Bach, for pianism as art, and for Bach (through Busoni) as truth. The *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* is musician's music, making no concessions to audience appeal. It is, like all of Busoni's transformations of Bach, a belief in Bach as the future, not as the past; in its very triumphalism, it attempts to mold the future.

One thanks God that the miracle of recording has enabled Petri's playing to find a kind of permanence in the ears and hearts of music lovers that could have scarcely been predicted in the last years of his career, clouded as they were by his principled exile from Nazi Europe and by his advancing age. And yet, even considering the interlocking factors of exile and age, it still remains remarkable that, as a great musician-pianist, Petri was never able to gain anything in the United States like the respect and even celebrity that he had earned in pre-war Europe.

Part of the reason for this lamentable state of affairs was no doubt the public ascendancy enjoyed by the very Italian Arturo Toscanini and by many musicians of Eastern European and French origin. The Eastern Europeans would certainly include the pianists Horowitz and Rubinstein, the violinist Jascha Heifetz, the cellist Gregor Piatigorsky, and, among chamber groups, the Budapest Quartet; the French musicians would include the pianist Robert Casadesus and the violinist Zino Francescatti. And yet the very Germanic Artur Schnabel was a great guru of the American audience, the equally Germanic and hardly pianistically pristine Rudolf Serkin was beginning his great American career, and his father-in-law, the violinist and conductor Adolf Busch, was already something of a saint to elite American music lovers.

I am tempted to say that Petri's problem was Petri himself, both as man and as musician. As a man, bright and witty, he seemed haughty and even distant, a person in his abilities and in his self-regard superior to those around him, colleagues and audience alike, and not only in musicianship—musical arrogance is always allowed and is indeed often profitable—but also in temper

8 My copy of the Solomon recording is in a 1970s Turnabout/Vox LP set, THS 65068/0, containing, in addition to the "Waldstein," the last five Beethoven sonatas.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of mind. Petri was smart, and he was cultured; he was well-read, and he was marvelously well-spoken. He was, in intellectual matters, something of a superior human being—and he paid the price for his superiority. It must be said too that Petri lacked a really sure instinct for business: in a sad story contained in Allan Evan's fascinating notes for the Pearl all-Petri CD, we are told that when Petri was approached simultaneously by the famous EMI producer Walter Legge and by an American company to record Beethoven sonatas, Petri chose the American company, telling Legge that the name Westminster sounded better than the name Angel (the name EMI used for its American releases).

But it would be wrong to leave without understanding that the fault, if fault it be, was not simply, or mostly, Petri's as a man. Ultimately, what held Petri back in America in the 1940s was the musical choice he had made at the beginning of the century. He did not choose Chopin, as did Rubinstein and Horowitz, or unadorned Beethoven and Schubert, as did Schnabel; he did not, in other words, choose (among pianists) either the unbuttoned romanticism of Horowitz and Rubinstein, or the unadorned (and sometimes weakly executed) Beethoven and Schubert of Schnabel. Petri chose instead to follow in the footsteps of Busoni, and to go no further than his master. What in practice this meant was playing a repertory heavy in transcriptions, and in what might be called a richly embroidered but always cool version of the classics. It meant playing Bach and Schubert in transcriptions, then already suspect to the most fashionable musical taste; it meant playing Liszt not as a composer of crowd pleasers but as a serious musical force; above all, it meant preaching the gospel of Busoni, a man forgotten as a pianist and ignored as a composer. Petri chose to be a musician who found the highest musicality in what for others were seen as merely virtuoso, not to say bombastic, versions of original masterpieces. In this, he looked backward to the nineteenth century, not forward to the twentieth.

In twentieth-century music, Petri, like all his great pianistic colleagues, rejected the music of Schoenberg and Berg, and of their epigones; unlike many of them, he rejected as well Bartók and Prokofiev, and even Debussy and Ravel. His guiding star was Busoni; despite sporadic attempts at Busoni revivals—the New York City Opera, for instance, will be doing Busoni's *Doktor Faust* this coming fall—neither large audiences nor famous performers have seen fit as yet to follow Petri's choice. But whatever is to be Busoni's compositional fate, it is both heartwarming and fitting that Petri's performance of the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* stands as his own monument. Petri, as Busoni before him, makes clear to us that there is no other choice than to assume that in art, as in life, honesty counts for something.

Publisher's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $6 each. A list of highlights is available upon request from the Office Manager.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Photography

Rescued

by Jed Perl

In the 1980s, Gay Block took photographs of over a hundred non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust in order to save the lives of Jews. Working with the writer Malka Drucker, Block traveled around the United States and Canada and to Europe and Israel to meet these men and women. Though some of them had already been honored for their work by Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial and archives, others had not had their stories told until Block and Drucker, with the help of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers in New York, found their way to their doorsteps. These people—who have come to be called Righteous Gentiles or Christian Rescuers or, in deference to the fact that quite a number of them are agnostics or atheists, simply Rescuers—these people came from all kinds of backgrounds, did all kinds of things before, during, and after the war, and are united by what seems in almost all cases to have been an immediate, intuitive decision to do whatever they could to save the lives of Jews. A selection of Block's photographs is up at the Museum of Modern Art through April 7. Those and more are included in *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*, the book by Block and Drucker that has just been published.[1] At the Modern, the photographs are interspersed with blocks of texts excerpted from the interviews in the book.

Everybody who has read about these rescuers is struck by the simplicity of their stories. In the new book the rescuers explain their actions in the most modest terms imaginable: "What I did was something useful, that's all." Or: "I don't know exactly why I helped. It's just the kind of person I am." Or: "It was a natural thing to do. . . . When the Jews started coming from the forests and they were hungry, we gave them food and we didn't think anything of it." Or: "I was surprised to be able to do what I did. I was thrown into it, and I took the devil by the horns and I did it." Or: "By and by we got more involved in the underground. Then we had to make a decision: do we do this, go on with this? That's the moment when we made the decision. And we said yes; we couldn't do any differently than say yes." These are the voices of people who in some cases ended up saving the lives of dozens and even hundreds of Jews. (Some of them assisted other victims of Nazi persecution as well.) Their heroism—a heroism carried on in the face of extraordinary danger and the almost universal complacency of their neighbors—is both exhilarating and unsettling: exhilarating because it proves that people do have choices, unsettling because we realize that so few people make the right choices or make any significant choices at all.

Reading these interviews, we are carried

1 *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*, by Gay Block and Malka Drucker, with a prologue by Cynthia Ozick; Holmes & Meier, 255 pages, $49.95; $29.95 paper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into a world in which everything is very clear. The rescuers' moral courage is like the clear light of day. And the achievement of Gay Block's color portrait photographs is that they create a visual correlative to these stories. Block photographs her subjects matter-of-factly, often in their homes, almost always in natural light. In a "Note from the Photographer" at the back of the book, Block writes:

> When I began this series of portraits I wasn't sure whether to use black and white or color so I shot both at the first thirty-five sessions. My initial preference had been the black and white, but when I studied the images, only the color seemed to represent what I had seen and felt during the sitting. . . . These people had told us stories of unbelievable heroism but they were all unassuming and modest. Therefore I did not need to add drama to their images, which is sometimes the effect of black-and-white portraits. On the contrary, I wanted the photographs to represent the rescuers with as much reality as possible, and black and white, with its qualities of abstraction, moved the images one step further away.

Block's instincts were absolutely on the mark. Indeed, Block's photographs are so ordinary-feeling, I fear that many people will not realize how much artistry has gone into them.

Photography has always been an ideal medium for portraiture; within a few years of Daguerre's invention, the photographic portrait was ubiquitous. And right from the start photographers saw that by gathering together portraits of a number of individuals they could give us the collective portrait of a profession, a class, a community. Photographers delighted in discovering whole categories of portrait subjects that the camera had not known before, and somehow they managed to build the exhilaration of discovery into their images. It begins in the 1840s with Hill and Adamson's portraits of the delegates to the convention at which the Free Church of Scotland was founded. Then there are Nadar's portraits of the political and literary and artistic lights of mid-nineteenth-century France; Julia Margaret Cameron's portraits of her friends, who included the leading artists and intellectuals of Victorian England, among them Tennyson and Sir John Herschel; John Thomson's portraits of the street vendors of London; the photographs of the urban proletariat by Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine; August Sander's portraits of the German people of the early twentieth century; Erich Salomon's candid snapshots of politicians at work in the late Twenties and Thirties; the impoverished Americans that Dorothea Lange and Russell Lee and Walker Evans and Ben Shahn photographed for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression.

What these photographers do in the way of composition and technique is secondary; their greatness—their ability to make the documentary label feel utterly inadequate—rests in their being immensely curious but somehow disinterested. In the face of their work all the arguments that we've heard about the troubled relations between photography and reality and truth sound rather academic. We know that photography doesn't equal truth, but we've all looked at the Nadar photograph of Delacroix or a Jacob Riis of immigrants in a sweatshop and felt that we were getting pretty close to the truth. Gay Block's work gets that close, too. The investigation that she and Malka Drucker udertook was a labor of love. Eventually, meeting these people seems to have become an obsession. But the obsession isn't imposed on the rescuers. It's the rescuer's story—not the photographer's—that is told.

I don't imagine that anybody could go through the show at the Museum of Modern Art and not be struck by the great variety of people who became rescuers. The people whom Block and Drucker visited came from many different social and economic groups. They include intellectuals and professionals and working people, people who first began to help Jews because they had a husband or lover or close friend who was Jewish, people

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who saw this as an extension of other kinds of political activism, people who saw it as a Christian act, and people who simply, at a moment when somebody asked them for help, could not say no. Some of the rescuers had always had a particular feeling for Jews and Judaism, some for one reason or another ended up living in Israel, at least one refused to go to receive an award at Yad Vashem because she so strongly disapproves of the current policies of the Israeli government. The variety is elating: it shows us that all kinds of people can turn out to be heroes. But for Gay Block the variety of her subjects must have also posed difficulties. How do you treat so many utterly different people equally? (Scholars have attempted to find constants within all the variety, but we museumgoers may prefer that these heroes not fit into a theory.)

Anybody who looks at contemporary portrait photography knows what the problems are. On the one hand, there are the photographers who pay so much attention to the ordinariness of their subjects that they end up banalizing people, by turning everybody into a sociological cliché. On the other hand, there are the photographers who dramatize their portrait subjects overly much—who use stark backdrops, or that black and white that Block rejected, to turn everyone into an icon. Of course there are certain decisions about framing, about lighting that will have to be made by a photographer. But in portrait photography there's a lot to be said for letting the sitter take the lead, and that's exactly what Gay Block has done.

Block doesn't push the camera into people's faces—that's the main thing. (If that sounds easy, consider how few photographers manage it.) She makes her subjects feel at ease with the camera, and the result is images that breathe. One of the most remarkable photographs is of Irene Opdyke, born in Poland in 1921, who hid a dozen Jews. She was working as a servant to a German major in the Polish town of Ternapol when she met "twelve Jewish people who worked in the Gestapo laundry room. We became friends. They had been people of means, businessmen and women, a medical student, a lawyer, a nurse. I thought we were all the same: we were all in trouble and the Germans were our enemy. . . . [O]ne day I heard them [the major and his colleagues] making plans to wipe out the whole ghetto in Ternapol, and I knew this meant my friends in the laundryroom would be killed. I didn't know what to do. Then a miracle happened. About three days later the major called and said, 'I have a villa and I want you to be my housekeeper.' I knew then that could be the place I would hide the Jews. They stayed in the attic when the major was downstairs and in the cellar when he was upstairs." The woman who is telling this story in California in the 1980s has an elaborate, apparently dyed blonde coiffure and carefully made up eyes and bright red lipstick and a red dress and bangle bracelet to match. In an introduction to her story Drucker mentions Opdyke's "attractive appearance, Zsa Zsa Gabor accent, and sense of drama," and as we look at the photograph of her we know that she's the kind of suburban matron that visitors to the Museum of Modern Art might be tempted to find ridiculous. We also know that a lot of photographers would accommodate that audience's basest instincts by turning Opdyke into a high-camp saint—a rescuer out of a John Waters movie. There are a lot of photographers who would use the close-up portrait view in a shrill, mean-spirited way. They'd use the hyperbole implicit in color photography to turn Opdyke into a lurid, overbearing presence. Gay Block won't do that. I suspect that she's incapable of not treating a person as an individual. She has photographed Opdyke so gently, so unobtrusively that we see this Polish heroine exactly the way she wants and deserves to be seen—as elegant, self-assured.

Visiting rescuers in their homes, Gay Block has, I think, given us as much of those homes as the people would want us to see. When the houses are elegant, a source of pride, she has opened up the focus a bit, so that we can admire arrangements of pictures

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on a wall, elegant objects on a table. (In the Opdyke photograph we see yellow-and-white upholstery, a purple satin throw pillow, a green plant.) When the house is obviously little more than a roof over a head, Block has refused to linger on infelicities, has passed over them—as, one feels, the people who live here do, too. Block has for the most part let her subjects pose themselves. The poses are unselfconscious, comfortable. The photographs were taken at the ends of the interviews. By then the extraordinary stories had been told, and the very process of talking about the past seems to have created a bond between the visitors and their host or hosts. "I often took no more than ten minutes to take the picture," Block writes—and these photographs, even the most formal among them, are intimate without being intrusive.

Of all the great photographic portrait cycles, Block's is closest in spirit to August Sander's studies of the people of Germany. Block's portraits have some of the graphic directness and some of the moral complexity that we admire in Sander's images. Sander shows us a people in all its variety—farmers and merchants and students and workers and intellectuals. Block shows variety, too. There is Zophia Baniecka, who kept people and guns in her house in Warsaw, and who now leans back in a garden chair, thoroughly enjoying a cigarette. There is Stefan Raczynski, a compact man with wary eyes, who together with his wife hid forty Jews on a Polish farm. There is the rather frail-looking French woman, Marie-Rose Gineste, who stands in her garden, her hands on the handlebars of the bicycle that she used for Resistance work around Montauban and still uses for errands around her village.

Block's photographs of rescuers form a kind of coda to Sander's project. Sander did not set out to make a particular political point with his photographs, but the Nazis apparently found his style of impartial portraiture threatening, and so the Gestapo attempted to destroy his entire life's work. (Some negatives survived.) It might be said that Block's photographs—which range through all the countries that the Nazis invaded—pick up where Sander's story leaves off. If Sander's photographs show us the faces of the German nation which allowed Hitler to come to power, Block's photographs commemorate some of that small band of heroes who defied his genocide machine.

There are other photographic records of the Holocaust: the pictures taken in the ghettos as the Nazis were emptying them out; the pictures taken in the concentration camps when the Germans had fled and the Allies had arrived. Those concentration-camp photographs—the heaps of corpses, the survivors who are so thin they look like corpses—are among the essential documents of our time, especially when we consider that attempts are now being made to deny that the Holocaust ever took place. Yet after we have looked at the concentration-camp photographs, it is enough to know that they are there; to look at them too much turns us into Holocaust voyeurs.

Some of Gay Block's portraits of rescuers may become photographic classics. They have the inevitablility of the images that we keep returning to in the histories of photography. These portraits of people who kept other people from ending up in the death camps are a record of the Holocaust that we want to look at over and over again. The light in Block's photographs is remarkable—gentle and clear. It's the light that emanates from the rescuers' unclouded consciences.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

'S wonderful; 's marvelous; stinks

by Donald Lyons

Crazy for You, the "new Gershwin musical comedy" at the Shubert, is a reshaped and augmented granddaughter of *Girl Crazy*, a 1930 backstage musical with music by George and lyrics by Ira Gershwin. *Girl Crazy* is perhaps best remembered for introducing Ethel Merman, singing "I Got Rhythm." It was filmed twice, once in 1932 and again in 1943, the latter with Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland putting on a show to save a small school in the Southwest and Judy singing "Bidin' My Time," "Embraceable You," "But Not for Me," as well as "I Got Rhythm," and Busby Berkeley staging some kaleidoscopic numbers. There is thus much history—and much show-biz static—in the background of *Crazy for You*, and there was reason, in the abstract, to fear that it might turn out yet another exercise in condescending period camp on the order of *No, No, Nanette* or *42nd Street*. That would, however, have been to reckon without the artists who have brought fresh eyes and ears to the material.

First, some thirteen Gershwin tunes have been added, including "Someone to Watch over Me," "Nice Work If You Can Get It," and "They Can't Take That Away from Me." Ken Ludwig's book adheres to the backstage formulae in which a budding young Broadway entrepreneur is exiled to a frontier watering hole, Dead Rock, to foreclose a mortgage on the town theater. There he meets a local girl, whom he deceives by pretending to be mogul Bela Zangler (shades of Mr. Ludwig's *Lend Me a Tenor*). Their love goes awry until . . . Mr. Ludwig has a nice line in period wisecracks that propel us briskly from song to song. The direction by Mike Ockrent, who "co-conceived" the project with Mr. Ludwig, partakes of the spirit of economical energy. There is a welcome satirical edge to the evening, too, as *Les Misérables* is mocked at one moment and frontier gentrification (a grizzled saloon becoming Chez Lank, serving mineral water) the next.

More crucial to the success of *Crazy for You* is the choreography of Susan Stroman and the scenic design of Robin Wagner. Indeed, the real virtue of Mr. Ludwig's neo-Twenties verbal platform is to provide these two a spanking, well-swept space. Mr. Wagner's sets are constantly metamorphosing from one thing into another; fluidity is their signature; they do not take themselves seriously but revel in playfulness. Miss Stroman gives a brilliant contemporary twist to the two dominant pop choreographic styles of the period: the mass synchronization of Busby Berkeley and the romantic tap of Fred Astaire. With a small but lovably funny line of chorines to work with, Miss Stroman pops them out of cars, winds them around telephone cords, and, in the single happiest image, plants them down in Dead Rock lined up against a throbbingly red sunset sky. The male galoots in Dead Rock are manipulated with equal brio, most inventively in "I Got Rhythm," where much west-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ern hardware—pickaxes, corrugated sheets, air pumps, jugs, etc.—are pressed into service to welcome the gals to town. It is a wicked homage to Agnes de Mille, and a lovely example of the minimalist wit of Susan Stroman. And her romantic modes are as fresh and fun. "[I'm Dancing and] I Can't Be Bothered Now" and "Shall We Dance?", two songs sung and danced by Astaire (almost as great a singer as he was a dancer), are among those added, and in them the tender inventiveness of Astaire's translation of romance into dance can be felt here. Harry Groener and Jodi Benson play and dance the romantic leads ideally, with grace but with weight, with humor but without condescension. "Shall We Dance?" and "Embraceable You" are the gentle first-act numbers of mutual attraction; "They Can't Take That Away from Me" (his number) and "But Not for Me" (hers) are the second-act breakup songs. (Not to worry—there is reason to hope the tears will be dried by the spectacular Ziegfeldesque finale, which, alas, in its vulgar largeness is one of the rare missteps in *Crazy for You*.) The way Susan Stroman choreographs romance, her hesitant and riskily odd bodily interlacings show, I think, that she looked with an artist's eye not just at Astaire but at Balanchine—and not so much at Balanchine's Gershwin ballet, *Who Cares?*, as at a Tchaikovsky ballet like *Piano Concerto* or a Stravinsky ballet like *Duo Concertant*.

But it is, naturally, the Gershwins who matter here, whose genius it is the achievement of *Crazy for You* to have restored *in* a theatrical setting, like an overvarnished painting cleaned *in* a church. Their first big hit was *Lady, Be Good!* in 1924; they closed the decade with *Girl Crazy*. They were children of the Twenties, although, of course, George would attempt his highest flight in 1935 in *Porgy and Bess*. The very fact that songs can be added and reassigned demonstrates that the musical in 1930 (Kern's *Showboat* excepted) was still a free-floating thing, loose and improvisatory, like, say, the Elizabethan plays of the 1580s. But the Gershwin songs are not loose or formless themselves at all; they are masterpieces of emotion teased into shapes of beauty and hope. The confluence of factors that readied this great age of the American musical, or perhaps better say of American songwriting—e.g., operetta; classical music lived intimately with by people; jazz and black music; America; New York; immigrant (largely Jewish) optimism and sadness and assimilationism—is endlessly ponderable. If Campion is read alongside Donne and Shakespeare, then the Gershwins and their peers deserve place alongside the greatest voices of their time.

The Most Happy Fella, now in revival at the Booth, is a 1956 musical version, for which Frank Loesser did book, music, and lyrics, of a 1924 play called *They Knew What They Wanted* by Sidney Howard. Loesser's only serious musical (he remains best known for *Guys and Dolls*), *Most Happy Fella* is the simple story of Tony, a rich, middle-aged, unprepossessing, and naïve Italian winegrower in California's Napa Valley, and of Rosabella, the poor, young, life-toughened San Francisco waitress he has convinced to come to the vineyard as his bride. The complication is Joe, the handsome young foreman whose picture Tony has sent Rosabella as his own and to whom she turns in desperation and exasperation on her wedding night when the groom, drunk, has broken his leg in a car accident. Later Rosabella, pregnant by Joe, confesses all to Tony, whom she has come to love, and she receives his love and pardon. Loesser's musical gets a worthy production at the hands of Gerald Gutierrez, who had already staged it at the Goodspeed Opera House. *Fella* has, indeed, often been staged—and killed—at opera houses. Here all the music is played by two pianos, and, if it sometimes feels like a backers' audition, there is air and space left for the (seemingly, and miraculously, unmiked) principals to emote boldly and clearly in their long songs. Spiro Malas, an opera pro who looks a bit like Ernest Borgnine (homely Fifties icon from the film *Marty*), is Tony and has the voice, emotional directness, and unaffected

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

humanity to put over his raw washes of longing and joy and suffering. Musical-comedy veteran Sophie Hayden as Rosabella puts across the same sort of warm ordinariness transfigured by love. Charles Pistone makes a fine Joe and does justice to his "gotta wander" aria, "Joey, Joey, Joey." John Lee Beatty's sets strive for an Edward Hopper loneliness and pathos and sometimes reach it, especially in one café set. Loesser added a bevy of musical-comedy conventions to Howard's play: a pair of corny ingénues out of *Oklahoma* (Liz Larsen and Scott Waara, in animated performances) who get to sing the high-energy showstoppers, "Standin' on the Corner" and "Big D"; a "blocking" sister of Tony's, who sets her face against Rosabella; the latest cuss words, like "son of a bitch," which must have sounded shocking in 1956.

Yet for all its ability to move, *Most Happy Fella* has some of the defects of the Fifties: a preachy belief in the power of love and forgiveness to overcome all; a half-hearted effort at deglamorizing; the feel of being a way station between past (those rather mediocre showstoppers) and future (the musical as plea for attention to suffering —Stephen Sondheim and *A Chorus Line* are somewhere around the corner); an unsureness of the validity of its own popular genre, shown here by the constant injections of Puccini. *Fella* is a masterwork, but there is a sadness to it beyond what was intended, for it represents a great popular art form in trouble and courting dissolution. And the twilight is the more visible here because Loesser is a finer artist than Rodgers and Hammerstein, who began the mischief, or than Sondheim, who perfected it.

The 1924 Howard play is worth a look. Not a work of any real distinction, it yet breathes a freer and fresher air than *Most Happy Fella*. People in it seem to have lives and interests beyond the totalitarianism of the emotions; however central the love triangle, they do care about other things. Joe's prosperity is the result of Prohibition and he loves to acknowledge it; Amy (as she is there called, not Rosabella) is the child of violent alcoholics on a Santa Clara prune-and-apricot farm; Joe is a Wobbly, an articulate and principled revolutionary ever on the move; there is constant bickering on a range of issues between the local padre and the local sawbones (the two seem to come from *Madame Bovary*). I read the Howard the night before I saw *Most Happy Fella* and wound up feeling that the characters in the 1950s work had been lobotomized. Which was perhaps justified in the instances of Tony and Rosabella, for their emotions were richly articulated in the music. But the supporting cast of galumphing and frolicking yokels (of the sort poked fun at in *Crazy for You*) seemed a plastic engrafting.

A striking coincidence attended the 1924 opening of *They Knew What They Wanted*. As Kenneth Macgowan notes, "Within a fortnight in November, 1924, New York saw the premières of two plays with the same plot. In O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted*, an old farmer marries a girl from far away. In O'Neill's play the wife has a child by the man's son, in Howard's play by a hired man." And the O'Neill ended tragically, the Howard comically. And three years later, in 1927, yet another play set among the "folk" talking "dialect" opened—DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's *Porgy*, the source for Gershwin's opera. In sum, though it is not possible to make any serious claims for the American drama of the Twenties (O'Neill not excepted) or, for that matter, of the Thirties, at least windows were being opened and breezes felt. In the intimacy of the Fifties, a certain claustrophobia was becoming palpable.

In light comedy in the 1920s and 1930s, America had Philip Barry; England had only Noël Coward. Coward's 1930 *Private Lives*, a play begun, I think I remember reading, in a hotel in Shanghai in 1929, received a condign production at the Broadhurst. *Private Lives* was built as a vehicle for celebrities—in the first instance, for Gertrude Lawrence and Coward himself—and has since been driven by such post- or paratheatrical nota-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bles as Tallulah Bankhead and Elizabeth Taylor. This time it stars Joan Collins, the glossy television celebrity; she is quite adequate as Amanda, the divorcée remarried to a bore and then resmitten with her ex, who traverses the same parabola. Miss Collins dances and does aerobics and sings and flings plates about in just the way minor celebrities do when, in summer stock, they determinedly simulate style. The director is Arvin Bloom, artistic director of the prestigious Long Wharf in New Haven; besides keeping traffic moving across the barnlike tundras of sets representing a Deauville hotel and a Paris flat, he apparently coached his star to imitate Maggie Smith's way of dropping her voice and elongating her vowels at the ends of laugh lines. (Maggie Smith seems the model for much "high" comic acting these days.) The manner, while clearly not native to Miss Collins, serves well enough. The male lead, Eliot, is pudgy, inert Simon Jones (he was Bridey in *Brideshead Revisited*), who settles for imitating the famous Coward clippedness. The other two—the bores, the foils—are shrill and vapid, but who can blame Jill Trasker or Edward Duke?

The production, then, is fitting. What astounds on seeing *Private Lives* is the emptiness, the nullity of the thing. It is universally referred to as a "classic" and treated with respect as in the line of Congreve and Wilde, if not quite on their level. The *Times* critic, after the ritual utterance of the mantra "classic 1930 comedy," remarks of the star that "an ideal Amanda Prynne she is not, but she may be the best possible Joan Collins." She struck me as more than up to Amanda; I'd rather have seen more of Joan Collins. Camille Paglia, brilliant analyst of Wilde, commits herself to this judgment: "A modern play in the Wildean manner, Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1930), has only one true Wildean line: 'Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs.' And even this generalization vulgarizes Wilde, in whom contemplativeness is never distorted by action."

But in truth there is nothing Wildean about Coward, let alone that nasty and common crack. Wilde was a master of paradox, which meant first being a master moralist out to make mischief. Coward writes like a lonely teenager blotting out a loud lower-middle-class family quarrel by retreating to his bedroom and fantasizing about how glamorous, sophisticated people somewhere out there must be talking. His dialogue, unbelievably dull, hits two notes: the insult simple ("She was a trifle overvivacious but that was only because she was fundamentally stupid") and the place-name dropped, supposedly to hide deep emotion ("Was the Taj Mahal like a box of sweets?" "Funny how the south of France . . ."). Audiences laugh, but really, I think, out of shock at the aggression, ignorance, and insecurity let slip. Poor Coward had, of course, been to those places and done those things, but there is nothing, nothing in his work that that teenager couldn't have written. There are no repressed emotions behind his lines, for there are no people behind his lines. And there is no wit *in* his lines to make up for their absence; there is only the cadence of wit without the tune. There is no sex, so to speak, just the noise. It is all like hearing jokes in Finnish.

What can be glimpsed through the ping-pong patter in Coward is the hell of a brainless hedonism. One tries to imagine a real afternoon with a real Amanda or a real Eliot. One tries to corporealize the glib wraiths in, say, *Design for Living*. Coward could not show us this; he is more like some character *in*, say, Laclos than he is like Laclos, that master diagnostician of the senses. Coward's famous comedies, hollow and fraudulent, ought to be given a rest. His one minor vein of genuineness ran to suburban sentimentalism, as best shown in the film *Brief Encounter* (1945), described by James Agee —with affection—as "all that woman's-magazine fiction might be at its own best" and "a sort of vanity-sized *Anna Karenina*." Coward, showing the Twenties at their shallowest, makes one appreciate how hard-won and artistically valuable was the maturity reached by the at-first-not-totally-dissimilar Scott Fitzgerald.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

Geniuses all the time

by Bruce Bawer

What was the Beat Generation all about, anyway? Here's Jack Kerouac's answer, as quoted by fellow beatnik John Clellon Holmes: "It's a kind of furtiveness. . . . Like we were a generation of furtives. You know, with an inner knowledge there's no use flaunting on that level, the level of the 'public,' a kind of beatness—I mean, being right down to it, to ourselves, because we all *really* know where we are—and a weariness with all the forms, all the conventions of the world. . . . So I guess you might say we're a *beat* generation."

Got that? For further illumination, there's this from Gregory Corso:

> What we are witnessing is a delicate shift of total consciousness in America—It won't be done through publicity or propaganda, articles or any form of—brainwashing persuasion—it will occur as response to altered history scene. . . . The shift and new recognition can only be incarnated and commenced thru great works of Art (as Whitman rightly demanded from poets to come)—Art to stand beacon like Statue naked and courageous, individual statement of private actual, uncensored individual perception. . . . Therefore a new art whose objectivity will be the accuracy of its introspection—the bringing forth of heretofore hidden materials, lusts, spiritual ambitions, experiences—in the new forms in which they will necessarily arrive—rather than the cringing self-consciousness of the psyche whose individuality has been so thwarted—that it masks itself and deceives others—under a guise of a received system of thought, of a system of thought at all, a received mode of feeling (which is never received but constantly occurs on its own) (when true) (when at all) or measure, stanzaic or structural, as far as its poesy is concerned. O fear of the fury of subjective revolution, death and new beat insight!—

And here, for good measure, is Michael McClure on the same subject:

> We were locked in the Cold War and the first Asian debacle—the Korean War. . . . We hated the war and the inhumanity and the coldness. The country had the feeling of martial law. An undeclared military state had leapt out of Daddy Warbucks' tanks and sprawled over the landscape. As artists we were oppressed and indeed the people of the nation were oppressed. . . . We knew we were poets and we had to speak out as poets. We saw that the art of poetry was essentially dead—killed by war, by academies, by neglect, by lack of love, and by disinterest [*sic*]. We knew we could bring it back to life. . . . We wanted to make it new and we wanted to invent it and the process of it as we went into it. We wanted voice and we wanted vision.

When Allen Ginsberg introduced the world to "Howl" at a now-fabled 1955 reading in San Francisco's Six Gallery, everyone present knew "at the deepest level," declares McClure, "that a barrier had been broken,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership systems and power-support bases."

Reading such slovenly, overheated prose in *The Portable Beat Reader*, edited by Ann Charters, one hardly knows which is more astonishing: that these men and their cohorts could ever have acquired significant literary reputations in the first place, or that, more than thirty years later, when many of their far more gifted contemporaries are virtually forgotten, every last member of the Beat fraternity who ever picked up a pencil (or, in the case of Neal Cassady, stole a typewriter) has been accorded an honored place in the history of American letters.[1] Few have played so industrious a part in this enterprise as Charters, who has for three decades been what one must, I suppose, call a "Beat scholar"; the biographer of Kerouac and editor of a two-volume encyclopedia entitled *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America*, Charters functions in the present *Reader* as an utterly uncritical tour guide, a literary version of the cordial, discreet lady from the PR office who shows you around corporate headquarters. Moreover, if in one sense Charters is the literary antithesis of the Beats—her prose as orthodox of syntax and as wearisomely academic in tone as theirs is frenzied and ungrammatical—in another sense she is their true compeer, for her writing evinces a thoroughly Beat-like ungainliness. "As a facet of our country's cultural history," reads a typical sentence in her introduction, "clusters [i.e., literary cliques] have been an outstanding feature of our literature. . . . The discovery of the word 'beat' was essential to the formation of a sense of self-definition among the earliest writers making up the cluster that would later call itself members of a 'Beat Generation.'" By the time one has reached the end of the introduction (in which she identifies one of Burroughs's favorite books as "Spengler's *Decline and Fall of the West*"), one knows better than to expect from Charters anything resembling literary taste or critical intelligence.

Indeed, she toes the entire Beat line, celebrating the writers' "attack on such cherished institutions as capitalism, consumerism, the military-industrial complex, racism, and ecological destruction" and explaining that while "[e]arlier modernist poets like Ezra Pound or Lost Generation writers like Ernest Hemingway had attacked the system from the safeguard of their life abroad as expatriates, . . . the Beat Generation writers protested their country's excesses on the front lines." The front lines! To speak in this way of the likes of Ginsberg and Kerouac is to insult anyone who ever engaged in selfless, perilous struggle against a perceived wrong. The Beats didn't know what it meant to commit oneself, heart and soul, to real political action (nor, McClure to the contrary, did they have a clue how it might feel to be oppressed or to live under martial law); what Charters chooses to deem their "protest" consisted, in the years before they became famous, of hanging out, taking drugs, having indiscriminate sex, and living off money stolen from acquaintances or cadged from friends and family. Once they'd achieved celebrity status, moreover, they were too busy making the front pages to put themselves on any front line; far from hurling "Howl" against a harsh wall, Ginsberg lobbed it into the appreciative arms of newspaper reporters and magazine editors who were eager for some sign of sensational dissent in America—and into the arms, as well, of a growing population of young people in search of an image to suit their notion that they were a special generation.

For the Beats came along at a time when hardly anyone in America was rebelling (and when, for a middle-class white American man, there was hardly any reason *to* rebel); indeed, an early *Life* magazine article on the Beats was entitled "The Only Rebellion Around." (One of the more amusing ironies of Beat history is that while *Time* and *Life* were among the Beat writers' favorite tar-

1 *The Portable Beat Reader*, edited by Ann Charters; Viking, 642 pages, $25.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gets, those trend-happy periodicals played a big part in making them famous.) For America, it was a time of peace and freedom and unparalleled affluence; but it was also a time when many Americans were buying simple-minded self-help books that told them how to win friends and influence people, how to improve their lives through positive thinking, and so forth. The Beats appealed to the underside of this trend: what they peddled to young people, essentially, was a look, an attitude, a strategy for self-redefinition. It was every bit as crude a strategy as those peddled by Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale; the difference, of course, was that the aim was not to become a more happy and successful member of American society but to become a misfit. If, like Carnegie and Peale, the Beats and their *Weltanschauung* hit it big, the ultimate reason, ironically, lay in the tolerance and prosperity of 1950s America: youngsters became beatniks, in other words, only because they knew that the society they lived in was tolerant enough to let them get away with it and that their parents were affluent and indulgent enough to bankroll them.

The Beats were hardly, then, true stormers of barricades. (To be sure, in later years Ginsberg and others were happy to associate their names with various movements, including those for black and gay rights, but those causes owed nothing to the Beats, who were patently vexed less by the shortcomings of American society than by the inherent burdens, limitations, and responsibilities of adult life itself, and who were, in this regard, precursors of the Sixties at their most juvenile.) Indeed, their notions of sex roles were as traditional as those of any Rotarian. Charters doesn't face up to this; she even manages to blame the Beats' adherence to the double standard on "the sexism of the times," without explaining how this jibes with their supposedly wholesale rejection of "the times." Why doesn't the fact that the Beats conformed perfectly, in this regard, to middle-class practices communicate something to Charters about the shallowness of their so-called revolt?

This shallowness is in evidence from the opening pages of *The Portable Beat Reader*, the first of whose six parts, entitled "The Best Minds of a Generation," begins with the principal texts of the movement: fifty-odd pages apiece by Kerouac (mostly from *On the Road*, whose first chapter is reprinted *in toto*), Ginsberg (mostly "Howl" and "Kaddish," both presented in their entirety), and Burroughs (roughly equal-length bits from *Junky*, *The Yage Letters*, *Naked Lunch*, and "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness"). These are followed by a brief passage from John Clellon Holmes's novel *Go* (in which the Kerouac character borrows some money, saying "My mother gets paid on Friday, so we can get it back to you by then") and a few short poems by Gregory Corso, as well as works by two Beat figures whom one does not ordinarily think of as writers: Herbert Huncke, the thug who turned Burroughs on to heroin and introduced the Beats to the word "beat," is represented by a couple of clumsy vignettes that might well be the work of an eighth grader; Carl Solomon, the mental patient to whom Ginsberg dedicated "Howl," weighs in with three scraps, part memoir and part musing, from his collection *Mishaps, Perhaps*. (If Charters's motive, in including Huncke and Solomon, was to make the selections by the big names look stronger by comparison, she has succeeded: Huncke and Solomon prove that prose can be even more dopey and disjointed than in Kerouac and Burroughs.)

What is left to say about the Beat movement's chief monuments? To reread *On the Road* is to be reminded why its romanticism and energy appeal to many high-school and college students. For all its repetitiousness (and, ultimately, tedium), there are moments of dizzy lyricism in this book, and Kerouac does capture something of the restlessness that motivates his characters to ramble back and forth across the United States; he evokes something, too, of the rural highways and mean streets, and of the pathetic desperation with which his overgrown adolescents watch time—and their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

youth—passing them by. But the book's first chapter doesn't stand up very well on its own; and from the perspective of 1992, the whole thing feels terribly dated—it's a fading relic, not an enduring artwork. Of the other Kerouac excerpts, the five choruses culled from "Mexico City Blues" read like old TV-sitcom parodies of beatnik verse (sample: "All the endless conception of living beings / Gnashing everywhere in Consciousness / Throughout the ten directions of space"); the two-page list of "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," which was presented to this critic in graduate school as a key document in the history of American literature, is staggeringly vapid; and even sillier is "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose," which consists of a numbered "List of Essentials" for the modern prose writer. These "essentials" range from relatively lucid fortune-cookie mandates ("Accept loss forever"; "Be in love with yr life") to bemusing and/or dubious vatic assertions ("Visionary tics shivering in the chest"; "You're a Genius all the time"). The recurring idea is that insanity is a literary asset: "Be crazy dumbsaint of the mind"; "Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better."

As for Ginsberg's "Howl," it seems more heavy-handed and fraudulent than ever. Ginsberg has so often endorsed the "crazier the better" philosophy ("I'm so lucky to be nutty," he wrote in "Bop Lyrics") that his implied anguish over the destruction by madness of "the best minds of his generation" seems unconvincing—as, of course, does the idea that the people he's writing about could be the best minds on the block, let alone of their generation. In "America," his Stalin-era sarcasm about his countrymen's posture toward "them bad Russians" strikes a Yeltsin-era reader as particularly repugnant; and one finds oneself more irked than ever by his self-dramatization ("America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel"). At least the Burroughs selections are evocative and of documentary interest: in the pages from *Junky*, for instance, he takes the reader on an expedition into the lower depths of wartime Manhattan and explains the difference between "tea heads" and "junkies."

But one can't pretend to be very impressed by any of these Beat artifacts. On the contrary, one waits in vain for a clever or felicitous turn of phrase or a single coherently expressed idea. Bad as the Beat corpus is, moreover, it is at a special disadvantage when read in excerpts. These writers, to the extent that they shine at all, don't shine sentence by sentence or even page by page; the strength, if one can call it that, of a Kerouac or Burroughs lies not in a knack for the beautifully shaped vignette but in an ability to capture, over a long stretch, and with all the clunkiness, if you will, of a modern (if lesser) Melville or Dreiser, the mood and rhythm and moral vacuity of a certain kind of bohemian life. In fact, the very notion of an anthology would appear to contradict Kerouac's credos about "Deep Form," "undisturbed flow," "the holy contour of life," etc.: a true Beat acolyte, one should think, would no more read Beatlit piecemeal than a jazz aficionado would buy an album consisting of thirty-second cuts of Charlie Parker.

To one's surprise, Part One proves to be the most substantial section of the *Reader*; almost everything that follows feels like filler, marginalia, afterthoughts. Part Two is taken up entirely by letters between Kerouac and Neal Cassady (the prototype of *On the Road*'s Dean Moriarty) and by excerpts from Cassady's autobiography and from Kerouac's second book about him, *Visions of Cody*. In a typical missive, Cassady recounts in painfully illiterate prose how he met a virgin on a bus ride from Saint Louis to Kansas City and

> decided to . . . seduce her, from 10:30 AM to 2:30 PM I talked. When I was done, she (confused, her entire life upset, metaphysically amazed at me, passionate in her immaturity) called her folks in Kansas City, & went with me to a park (it was just getting dark) & I banged her; I screwed as never before; all my pent up emotion finding release in this young virgin (& she was) who is, by the by, a *school teacher!*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

All the excerpts in this section have manifestly been chosen for their elucidation of the temperament and life style of Cassady, who for his fellow Beats personified the Beat ethos. Yet readers may be excused for being loath to slog through these slipshod accounts of his grubby life.

In Part Three, Charters surveys eight poets of the "San Francisco Renaissance," among them Kenneth Rexroth, Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Whalen, Charters tells us, "broke free from his obsession with imagist poetry and the formal academic poetry of T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens after taking peyote in 1955: 'all my dopey theories and hangups and things about writing . . . suddenly disappeared.'" (Yes, that would do it, wouldn't it?) As for Rexroth, his longest contribution here is his notorious poem "Thou Shalt Not Kill," which is dedicated to Dylan Thomas and which, as he explains in an author's note, "was written in one sitting, a few hours after a phone call came from New York with the news that Dylan had died." The poem is a standard Beat harangue about America, capitalism, the System. "They are murdering all the young men," Rexroth insists, and goes on to compare Thomas's death to the stoning of Stephen. After naming many dead and broken poets—the ragtag roster includes Edwin Arlington Robinson, Hart Crane, and Sara Teasdale—Rexroth focuses again on "the sparrow of Cardiff," blaming his demise on "[Robert] Oppenheimer the Million-Killer," "Einstein the Grey Eminence," and, in effect, every other true-blue American, including the reader of the poem:

> Who killed him?
> Who killed the bright-headed bird?
> You did, you son of a bitch.
> You drowned him in your cocktail brain.
> He fell down and died in your synthetic heart.
> . . .
> He was found dead at a liberal weekly luncheon.
> He was found dead on the cutting room floor.
> He was found dead at a Time policy conference.
> Henry Luce killed him with a telegram to the Pope.
> Mademoiselle strangled him with a padded brassiere.
> Old Possum sprinkled him with a tea ball.
> After the wolves were done, the vaticides
> Crawled off with his bowels to their classrooms and quarterlies.
> . . .
> I want to run into the street,
> Shouting, "Remember Vanzetti!"
> . . . And all the birds of the deep sea rise up
> Over the luxury liners and scream,
> "You killed him! You killed him.
> In your God damned Brooks Brothers suit,
> You son of a bitch."

Its lack of literary merit aside, what, one wonders, does any of this have to do with Dylan Thomas, who died of alcoholism, pneumonia, and a collapsed ego after living a "naked-nerved and blood timid" life mostly in Wales and London? Far from constituting a tribute to Thomas, this poem, with its inane attempts to attribute the Welshman's death to *Time* magazine, to various elements of the military-industrial complex, and to patrons of Brooks Brothers, represents an insult to the poet's memory; Thomas serves as a cudgel with which Rexroth clubs his own enemies for his own reasons. If there is anything resembling a clear motive here, it is not righteous indignation but a powerful resentment with which the poet seems not to have come to terms—resentment not only toward the sort of people who can afford to shop at Brooks Brothers but also toward a recently deceased foreign poet whose verses had, if the truth be told, received far more attention on these shores than Rexroth's.

From Rexroth and friends we proceed to Part Four, a grab-bag of work by thirteen "Other Fellow Travelers" who might be described as marginal Beats at best. These range from Bob Dylan (Charters actually includes the lyrics to "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'") to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tuli Kupferberg (who is represented by an excerpt from his college-humor-magazine-style inventory of *1001 Ways to Beat the Draft*) to Peter Orlovsky (a high-school dropout whose chief claim to fame is his unenviable thirty-year stint as Ginsberg's significant other). Charters dutifully reproduces Orlovsky's witless description of his method of "spontaneous prose": "Just follow the mind out like this, when you have a hunch working in your mind or see a picture that has already expressed its self in the mind, then let that come out and not some other fast thought or idea that just jumped into the main one—but just write out what you feel the most at one moment and you can't go wrong for you can just write out forever—the pen knows its job—." The section also includes the longtime anthology standbys "In Memory of Radio" by Amiri Baraka and "The Day Lady Died" by Frank O'Hara, neither of whom one would classify as a Beat poet—though both at least provide the book with some desperately needed variety in style and theme.

One thing that the *Reader*'s first four sections underscore is that the great majority of Beat writing, whether prose or verse, is highly autobiographical, drawn directly from the real-life adventures of the Beats and their womenfolk. (In an excerpt from Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums*, Charters even puts the characters' "real" names in brackets, as if to acknowledge that this stuff is meant to be read not as literature but as gossip.) Over and over, one encounters the same historical tidbits—first in Charters's introduction, then in the biographical notes that precede the selections, and then in the selections themselves. For this reason, it is hard not to turn to Part Five, "Tales of Beatnik Glory: Memoirs and Posthumous Tributes," without feeling that one has already had quite enough of memoirs and tributes. The curious thing about these pieces—whose authors include Kerouac's wife, Jan; Cassady's wife, Carolyn; and Burroughs's son, William, Jr.—is that they evince remarkably little variation in manner and sensibility; after a while, the anecdotes all blend together into a single sad story from which nobody involved seems to have learned a thing. That includes Charters, whose title for this section would appear not to be ironic: to her, one gathers, the story of the Beats is a tale of glory.

It was also—to the Beats themselves, if not to many discriminating readers—a tale of holiness. As Charters explains, to Kerouac "the linguistic root of the word 'beat' also carried the connotations of beatitute or beatific." Throughout the *Reader*, sprinkled about like so much salt or pepper, one finds words suggestive of the sacred. In a postscript to "Poet of the Streets," Jack Michelene notes that the poem was "written on First Avenue off the Bowery in an alley of great souls." Philip Lamantia writes that "In the silence of holy darkness I'm eating a tomato" and finds "everywhere immanence of the presence of God." Ginsberg speaks of Huncke's "holy Creephood in New York," and in "America" asks: "America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?" Then, of course, there is his "Footnote to Howl," whose first line consists of the word "holy" repeated fifteen times, and whose next few lines make up a would-be Whitmanian catalogue: "The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!" If this litany is less than convincing, it's because one finds here no sense of awe or wonder in the presence of the things of this world and not the slightest hint of humility before the idea of Godhead. For all the renown of "Howl" and "Footnote to Howl," it seems to this reader that only in a spiritually destitute era could so many intelligent people accept the idea that an Allen Ginsberg understands the first thing about what it means to be holy.

But then such is the Beat mystique, which will, alas, doubtless be with us as long as we live in an age that prizes personality over character, display over discipline, superficial vigor and provocativeness over intellectual and emotional depth, and sensational self-indulgence over unspectacular self-sacrifice.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For a generation, people who pride themselves on not falling for a television ad for Dow Chemical or Archer Daniels Midland have allowed themselves to be taken in by the Beats' slickly marketed corporate image; people who recognize a cynical act by a mainstream politician at a hundred paces have chosen not to notice the calculatedness with which the Beats have manipulated the news media and the literary world to their own ends; and people who sneer at the conceit of movie stars have preferred to overlook the appalling narcissism with which Ginsberg, on many a public occasion, has attracted notice by disrobing. (Well, it's easier than writing a good poem.)

If readers have refused to see the Beats for what they are, however, so, it would appear, have the Beats. For all their blanket maledictions, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and company could never be faulted for being excessively humble or self-critical (Charters notes that Ginsberg was so irate at Holmes for his less than reverential rendering of him in *Go* that "The publisher withheld the paperback, fearing legal action"); they have rarely exhibited any irony or sense of humor about themselves; and though they vilify society for exploiting them in every conceivable (and, for that matter, inconceivable) way, there is nothing in their oeuvres to suggest that any of them has ever felt remorse over the very real ways in which they have used others—e.g., Ginsberg's sexual exploitation of minors, Kerouac's scrounging off his mother, and Burroughs's trolling of his fourteen-year-old son past his pederast drinking buddies in Tangier. Reaching the end of this disgraceful volume—which closes with a section of post-Fifties work by Ginsberg and others and an appendix that includes Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro"—one cannot help feeling that Charters would have rendered American letters a far more valuable service had she dropped this project and instead done a study of Beat self-promotion, complete with reprints of the Sunday-supplement profiles and newsmagazine features that brought the Beats fame and, eventually, transformed them into legends; for it is in the realm of publicity, and none other, that the Beats have demonstrated their much-vaunted genius.

Authoritarian Marxism

O. K. Werckmeister Citadel Culture.
Translated from the German
by the author with Diane Miliotes.
University of Chicago Press,
210 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Wayne Dynes

As part of the growth industry that has come to be known as "cultural studies," Otto Karl Werckmeister is both idiosyncratic and typical. Although he has been living in the United States since 1965, this Berlin-born scholar has never really unpacked his bags. He continues to publish much of his work in Germany, where his writings have generated an enthusiasm altogether unmatched on our shores. Yet his appeal is not limited to an exclusively German audience. He belongs to, and is read by, an international band of neo-Marxist critics of what was once sneeringly dubbed "late capitalism."

Werckmeister, who currently teaches at Northwestern University, has long pursued a calling as a medieval art historian. Attracted to thorny exegetical problems, he began by investigating occult numerological aspects of early medieval images—themes that seemed to gratify a yearning for special knowledge closed to the unthinking masses. Witness his patient counting of the many folds of the navel in an author portrait of an early Irish gospel book in Paris; the number he found—forty-six—is, you see, symbolic. But publishing such arcana would not yield the fame that Werckmeister sought. Recognizing the limitations of his outré and personalist interests, he sought to broaden his studies by concentrating on themes of ultimate concern: medieval rites of passage and, above all, the iconography of death.

Yet even this relevance did not suffice.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Energized by European events in the wake of the French uprising of May 1968, he next aspired to pundit status; Werckmeister sought to carve out a second career as a New Left cultural critic. Typical of this work is his 1970 essay on the "Yellow Submarine and the One-Dimensional Man." In these reflections he ponderously argued that the Beatles' cartoon film is a utopian fantasy lacking any revolutionary potential. Who ever thought that it had any? Also typical are his several studies of one of the canonical figures of modern art, Paul Klee. These studies remain controversial—and rightly so, since they strive to replace the aesthetic concerns at the center of Klee's work with the political concerns on its periphery.

But now Werckmeister tries another ploy. He hopes to astonish us by drawing all his disparate interests together in *Citadel Culture*. In fact, this small book purveys a jumble of topics: *The Name of the Rose* of Umberto Eco and the syncretistic writings of Jürgen Habermas, the comic-strip stories of the French cartoonist Enki Bilal, the electronic music of Pierre Boulez and of the German rock group Kraftwerk, and the paintings of Francis Bacon and of Robert Morris. This trendy mix he offers not just as a personal choice but as a telling set of exhibits symptomatic of our cultural plight.

Undergirding this little sampler of high and popular culture is a simple contrast. Werckmeister sees a dichotomy between two decades: the "argumentative" culture of the Seventies, which he regards as progressive because it confronted social problems and advocated change, and the more quiescent accommodationist culture of the Eighties, which reflects a withdrawal to a fortified redoubt: the citadel. Werckmeister's core image portrays Western civilization as embattled, beleaguered, beset by enemies on every side—and ripe for a fall.

Oddly, he traces his ruling metaphor of the citadel to John Winthrop's 1630 projection of the new society in Massachusetts as a "city on a hill." In this way he medievalizes and trivializes that hopeful vision, showing that he has little understanding of its meaning in the American political context. The more immediate source is quondam West Berlin surrounded by its wall. His choice of cover art, from a "serious" comic book by Bilal, luridly projects a future Berlin as a shabby outpost threatened by Third World hordes. Werckmeister wryly concedes that this 1982 drawing was a somewhat unlucky choice, as the German edition of his book appeared only four weeks before the opening of the Berlin Wall. Even so, he can't resist splashing this heavy-metal gunk on the dust jacket of the American edition. The irony remains patent: it was the Marxist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that decayed and fell, not dynamic capitalist West Berlin.

The reference to the Third World suggests that Werckmeister has aligned himself with the multiculturalist causes now salient in the United States. Not so. This professor's sympathies are few, lying mainly with his allies in the Marxist academy. Throughout the book runs a self-satisfied, hectoring tone—informed by an invincible elitism—that stands in stark contradiction to his ostensible embrace of "progressive" ideals. Werckmeister is an arrogant and uncharitable commentator, with malice toward all who do not share his views. Could it be that, despite his ringing calls to Germany to reexamine its Nazi past, Werckmeister is the ultimate specimen of the authoritarian personality exposed and pilloried by his mentor, Theodor Adorno? Adorno, too, felt uncomfortable in America because he found it vulgar. Regrettably, in Werckmeister's head no democratic personality has ever taken residence.

Werckmeister's hauteur masks the fact that his attempt to modernize himself has failed. The tides of history no longer favor his faction—if they ever did. While he and his friends disdained the coercive regimes of Communist Eastern Europe, they fondly hoped that, given a choice, the peoples of those countries would opt for a middle course, "socialism with a human face." These people did not, leaving the Western

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marxists high and dry. It has become gallingly clear that the only niche they have managed to create for themselves, these new *Kathedersozialisten*, lies in that still half-feudal realm of rank and tenure, the Western university.

Leaving aside his personal failings, one might still ask whether Werckmeister has a program. His attempt to give his strivings a broader institutional base has been unsuccessful, for the group he founded to achieve this end, the Marxist Caucus of the College Art Association, is moribund. In a recent theoretical manifesto published in the *Oxford Review of Art* he grants that recent political changes in Eastern Europe have made the political side of the enterprise moot. He forswears any simple determinism linking economic base and cultural superstructure. Still, somehow, "[I]n art history [Marxism] can maintain the full scope of the correlation between economics, society, politics, culture, and art." This is feeble stuff, for the "correlation" represents a Hegelian, perhaps even a Spenglerian, project rather than a Marxist one. In this essay Werckmeister reluctantly concedes that it is time for his crew to drop the "lingering self-righteous pathos" of triumphalism and their indiscriminate embrace of poststructuralist fads in order to sober up. Unfortunately the counselor proffering this advice remains himself intoxicated. Marxism is a drug he cannot renounce, and the aroma of his addiction rises from every page of *Citadel Culture*.

By now it should be evident that the intrinsic value of this new tract is slight. Its real subject is not the culture of the Seventies and Eighties but the long downward slide of Marxist intellectuals from high-spirited gloating over capitalism's imminent failure to increasing doubt and gloom. "The past decade has brought much uncertainty for left-wing intellectuals like myself," Werckmeister finally avers in his "Epilog." But two habits die hard. One is the deployment of abstract jargon that consistently evades empirical testing, giving the lie to the Marxist claim to adhere to "historical specificity." The other is the apocalyptic hope that somehow, someday, capitalism will at last self-destruct and so vindicate the prophetic fulminations of the Marxist scriptures.

As in earlier decades, some of our Marxist intellectuals have, to their credit, abandoned their lugubrious faith. Werckmeister represents a different party, the reconstructionists. His confusion and ambivalence, which bluster and fancy language cannot conceal, make him a useful barometer of the challenge confronting his confrères. As a spectacle of cognitive dissonance his predicament is not without its amusing aspects. In all likelihood some of his kind will win their way—by their own lights—to a rehabilitation of their cherished creed. We will still have Marxists with us. But tracking their mental gymnastics to wriggle free of the judgment of history helps to anticipate their future rationalizations, the easier to meet and refute them.

The tiger & the young lady

Hans Mommsen
From Weimar to Auschwitz.
Translated from the German
by Philip O'Connor. Princeton
University Press, 367 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Harold James

Hans Mommsen is one of Germany's most distinguished social historians, and a translation of a collection which includes his most influential essays makes an important range of ideas and interpretations available to an Anglo-Saxon audience. The essays presented in this volume originated at different times, and contain some overlapping material, but are thematically connected through their insistent probing of the great question of modern German history: the conditions for the rise of the National Socialist movement and the establishment of the National Socialist state.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It is not surprising that this issue should be at the center of discussion within the German historical profession. Nor is it peculiar that its many contributions have frequently carried a contemporary political implication. As the actual experience of Nazi terror faded, public political debate within the Federal Republic used history more and more as a way of making debating points about the present. There existed a kind of intellectual game available to opponents engaged in political argument: the strategy involved showing that the opposing party had some sort of connection with National Socialism and as a result should incur a moral and political disenfranchisement.

On the Left, critics presented National Socialism as a phenomenon of the Right, produced by intensely reactionary anti-socialists and anti-Communists and floating on an ideological bed of nationalism, already well prepared by the German Right. The far Left thought that capitalism would inevitably produce Fascism to defend itself against the workers' movement.

Conservatives or Christian Democrats replied by describing National Socialism as a variant of socialist collectivism. They pointed to the similarities between Nazism and Communism, and between Hitler and Stalin, and saw both as totalitarian dictators driven by ideologies. When an ecological Green party emerged, none of the established German parties hesitated in making a comparison with the back-to-earth and nature beliefs of the 1930s.

This was a political game that was easy to play in good measure because, as the best recent studies have shown, National Socialism was a broadly based and eclectic movement that sought to gain as wide a support as possible by mixing a potpourri of political theories and causes: some anti-Communist, some anti-capitalist, some anti-democratic, some radically democratic, some anti-clerical, some stressing the traditional values of family, hearth, and church (*Kinder*, *Küche*, *Kirche*).

An account that is genuinely historical will have to avoid the extremes of polemic and identification of only one strand of Nazi doctrine and practice. Yet in formulating theories of how Nazism arose, or even in saying what constituted the Nazi phenomenon, it will inevitably have a political message and agenda. Mommsen follows such a balanced course, but also knows that this is a subject which inherently raises contemporary political issues.

Mommsen's major theme is that the National Socialist phenomenon cannot be attributed to the ideas and personality of Adolf Hitler. Neither did it follow from a specifically Nazi ideology. Instead, Mommsen devotes a great deal of attention to pre-Nazi developments: especially to the pattern of youth revolts from the end of the nineteenth century against the values of civil society (or bourgeois society), when young rebels demanded authentic and healthy experience in place of what they saw as stuffy and over-civilized culture. The established parties of Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic could not deal with the powerful sentiment of youth revolt. They had become parties of an establishment which had grown physically old. One of the most interesting essays in the collection chronicles graphically the gerontocratization of the SPD, the socialist party which for much of the Weimar Republic obtained the largest share of the popular vote. The other parties which took part in the endless coalitions of Weimar politics were equally elderly, and photographs of the Reichstag in session capture the light gleaming off rimless spectacles and bald pates. By contrast, the new anti-democratic parties, the Communists and the Nazis, both successfully presented themselves as the parties of youth and vigor and energy, who would build a new and above all young Germany.

But it was not just a revolt of youth that produced National Socialism. In Mommsen's eyes, an equally critical component of the new politics was the extreme social defensiveness already existing in Imperial Germany but heightened by the domestic conflicts and upheavals of the First World

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

War, and by the Soviet Revolution of 1917. In Germany in 1918 and 1919 workers and soldiers formed council governments (*Räterepublik*: *Rat*, plural *Räte*, was the German word for the Russian *soviet*), and the country plunged into civil war. The new "fanatical" anti-Bolshevism made conservative politicians accept anyone who might provide an active defense against Communism, even if this defensive movement were to be anti-liberal (German conservatives did not really mind that) and violent. Prepared by the experience of a relatively long-standing youth revolt, the German elite chose an extreme and brutal anti-liberalism.

Analyzing the rise of National Socialism for Mommsen involves less the study of why people voted for Hitler than a depiction of a cowardly and manipulative bourgeoisie who saw Hitler as a tool for their purposes. They took the part of the young lady from Riga who went for a ride on the tiger.

Mommsen continues his analysis for the years after 1933, the era of the Nazi regime. The essays on National Socialist policy, and, in particular, the essay on anti-Semitism and the origins of the Holocaust, will seem to many readers iconoclastic. But Mommsen's purpose in de-emphasizing the role of Hitler, and presenting a less demonic account of the making of Nazi policies on race, is in no sense exculpatory. Rather he wants to show how the bureaucratic decision-making process, which involved substantial numbers of civil servants and army officers who in no fashion considered themselves to be ideological or fanatical Nazis, played the key part in the formulation, planning, and carrying-out of genocide. Anti-Semitism was in this version not the driving force on the road to Auschwitz: rather the elite accepted the idea that an enemy should be fought with militant methods, and devised inhuman ways of dealing with the human dislocation caused by war.

This is of course a thoroughgoing and comprehensive indictment of the German elite. It is also implicitly hostile to those contemporaries who before 1933 did not criticize that elite, and to those (including the Allied authorities) who did not after 1945 worry sufficiently about the reconsolidation of the position of the old establishment. The indictment is conducted with verve and intelligence, and with immense historical knowledge; and if it were true, it would constitute a devastating account of German politics and politicians before 1933 (who do indeed deeply deserve the retrospective condemnation of historians) and also in the years of the Federal Republic.

Some of the components of Mommsen's analysis have been the subject of intense scholarly (as opposed to merely political) debate in Germany and elsewhere. The first controversy is concerned with the policies of the governments immediately preceding Hitler. How did the conservative elite allow itself to be maneuvered by Hitler into supporting him as Chancellor in 1933? The explanation lies in the policies followed by the conservative Center party (the Catholic party) politician Heinrich Brüning between 1930 and 1932. It was in this period that the worsening depression drove farmers, the unemployed, and artisans and small businessmen away from the democratic parties. According to Mommsen, Brüning intentionally pursued severely deflationary policies which intensified the depression in order to bring about a constitutional reform within Germany and cut back the welfare state, and externally to end the reparation payments imposed by the 1919 Versailles Treaty. At least the foreign policy part of this account corresponds to the standard textbook treatment of the end of Weimar.

Since 1979 this view has been contested, on the whole successfully, in a series of writings produced by economic historians, notably Professor Knut Borchardt of Munich, but also Dr. Theo Balderston of Manchester University and the present reviewer. In their view, Brüning had few alternatives, and like our contemporary governments exposed to depression or even only recession, he faced agonizing policy alternatives. The Keynesian view that there was a good arsenal of government policies

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Donald Sultan

Paintings

March 21 to April 25, 1992

Knoedler & Company

19 East 70 Street, New York Telephone (212) 794-0550

against the depression has been quite thoroughly discredited—at least in the German case. Increased budget deficits in Germany in the early 1930s would have only further undermined confidence, and would have produced a worsening of economic crisis and no improvement.

As a result, a key part of Mommsen's argument on how the traditional elite worked to produce a Nazi government should be called into question.

A second controversy embedded in Mommsen's work concerns the character of Nazi ideology and of Hitler. John Lukacs recently called Hitler a "great revolutionary," and a young German historian, Rainer Zitelmann, has made this revolutionary quality the major theme in his analysis. Zitelmann is perhaps surprisingly the first academic in Germany to have produced a biography of Hitler, and he chronicles how the dictator wanted to transform and modernize German society. Zitelmann's Hitler tried to create a new social state, better housing, higher levels of consumption (the Volkswagen and the Autobahn were only the beginning), and equality of opportunity (of course within the racial community). In Zitelmann's view, this was a modernizing dictatorship with similar plans and similar brutality to the one created by Stalin.

For Mommsen, however, the emphasis in Nazi propaganda on modernity is nothing more than that—propaganda. It masked social defense. The Nazis were no more truly revolutionary than the youth movements of the late nineteenth century who tried to stage a revolt against bourgeois philistinism.

Perhaps neither Mommsen, who believes Nazism to be anti-modern, nor his younger critics, who want to portray Nazism as exemplifying the dangers and upheavals of modernity, are completely right. There is in the twentieth century a problem about defining modernity. Hitler did indeed believe himself to be at the forefront of a modern and scientific movement. He encouraged the technocratic approach to politics of a Fritz Todt or an Albert Speer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He thought Soviet-style politics to be the way of the future. Above all, he believed that liberal democracy was hopelessly antiquated and historically redundant. But there was an illusory element to all of Hitler's beliefs: his technocracy was efficient, but—as the war showed—not sufficient to combat superior technologies generated in liberal democracies. Looking at Hitler with the eyes of his contemporaries, he seems devastatingly modern. Retrospectively Mommsen is justified in seeing him as destructively anti-modern. Like many people in the middle of the twentieth century, Hitler was obsessed with modernity and profoundly mis-diagnosed it as involving planning, control, and manipulation.

Mommsen's work skirts around a third controversy. This concerns that part of National Socialism which is inexplicable in rational terms (and poses as a result a challenge to believers in rationalism): the centrality of racism (and in particular anti-Semitism) to Hitlerian and National Socialist politics. Hitler's modernity took the form it did because it was deeply imbued with racist concepts, which are very difficult to explain rationally in terms of the logic of social defense.

Mommsen's approach is characteristic of both the strengths and the limits of a social historical approach to major historical issues. It is always hard to use rational and rationalizing methods to describe the emergence of ideas and their peculiar power. Anti-Semitism, it is true, was not widely held as a belief in inter-war Germany, certainly in comparison with other European societies (as far as we can measure it by looking at public statements about belief: beyond that it is hard to go). Neither did it offer an obviously rational vehicle for the defense of the interest of social groups. In making both these points, Mommsen is drawing quite accurately on available historical evidence in the best empirical way. But it is not valid to go further and imply that these claims mean that anti-Semitism was not a powerful force, and did not exert an immense, obsessive, and compulsive influence on the minds of those men at the center of Germany's power structure with the genocide of the Second World War as a consequence.

We need a different kind of history to understand the thought of the individuals who perpetrated these crimes. Mommsen gives only the rational part of the picture which explains why the young lady wanted to go on the fatal ride. We should also know why the tiger wanted to be tigerish.

His conclusion is that there were fundamental weaknesses in German society (that may be analyzed rationally), and that a profound transformation—perhaps a revolution—was needed to overcome them. Hitler, who was the product of those weaknesses, could not possibly generate the modernizing impetus needed to overcome them.

Mommsen, the modern historian, does not ask some of the questions that lie at the heart of the discussion of the German question: why was German society in particular (rather than European society in general) so prone to youth revolts? Why was it German society which produced such violently explosive and destructive racism? But oddly, he does suggest answers in his final essay, which is devoted to an analysis of the work of Hannah Arendt.

Though sympathetic to many of Arendt's observations, he does not want to follow her conclusions. But Arendt provides good answers at least in part because many of the big issues are better answered by a brilliant philosopher interested in the role of political institutions than by an acutely observing but rationally minded social historian. For instance, youth revolts are common throughout history (think of David and Absalom), but they do not always destroy society, and they can be contained in a stable institutional framework. But in Germany, stable institutions which could channel and dissipate conflict were lacking; there was before 1933 a deficit of legitimacy and a weakness of authority. Arendt's approach was to look at totalitarianism as a response to "modernity" in its manifestation as mass society in which traditionally legitimate structures and au-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thorities disappeared. Germany appeared as the most striking instance of this case.

Mommsen speaks of Arendt's "pronouncedly elitist conservative views on democracy and politics, which set up the concept of authority as a counter to that of power and posited a concept of individual freedom based on the model of the ancient *polis*." Might not this "conservative" view, which Mommsen makes clear he rejects, hold the key to a historical as well as a political interpretation of the "German question"? Perhaps it also helps us to understand how liberal democracy could be built on an institutional basis after 1945 in Germany—and in general how it may emerge after the collapse of totalitarianisms.

Enterprising explicators

Harold Fromm
Academic Capitalism & Literary Value.
University of Georgia Press,
281 pages, $35; $16 paper

reviewed by William Rice

Just how radical are all those English professors whose seminar rooms ring with talk of *différance*, discourse formations, institutional critique, Eurocentrism, textual interrogations, marginalization, empowerment, the political unconscious, etc., etc., etc.? What sort of threat does the academic literary *gauchiste* pose to the established order? In *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value*, a collection of essays first published in such journals as *Critical Inquiry*, *The Georgia Review*, and *The Hudson Review*, Harold Fromm portrays the purported revolution in literary study as hardly "revolutionary at all [but] an exemplary specimen of capitalism in action."

Fromm does more than accuse professional radicals of careerism, hypocrisy, clubbish exclusivity, and other bourgeois failings. He examines at close range a broad sample of influential texts produced by feminists, deconstructionists, New Historicists, Marxists, reader-response critics, and African-American literary theorists. To the writings of professors Houston A. Baker, Terry Eagleton, Sandra Gilbert, Frank Lentricchia, Jerome McGann, and Elaine Showalter, among many others, he brings what he calls an "informal sociology of criticism."

A better term would be rhetorical analysis. Although Fromm rarely uses the vocabulary of the rhetorician, he offers a shrewd assessment of "the relation between what the critic-theorist says and what his or her texts actually seem to be doing." What they do, he argues in example after example, is contrary to the revolutionary and egalitarian stances usually struck. All too often the texts produced by academic radicals are exercises in self-aggrandizement and obfuscation, upon which spurious legitimacy is conferred by mesmerizing jargon, plentiful footnotes, and other signals of *wissenschaftliche* "rigor." Not only do the texts exhibit disdain for the uninitiated—students, nonspecialists, educated citizens, ordinary professors—but this Olympian attitude extends to literary works themselves and the artists who created them. Ironically, Fromm contends, it is now the theorist who becomes the colonizer and oppressor, the force that overwhelms difference and exercises cultural hegemony.

As Fromm observes, the idea of literary value is one of the first casualties of the new dispensation. Novels, plays, and poems no longer deserve our attention for the singular insights and pleasures they can give us or for the distinctive place they occupy in history and in the present. Instead, they are to be humbled, shown to be products not of independent minds but of oppressive cultures. In the squad-car slang of the oppositional scholar, works of literature are to be "interrogated" as to their political loyalties, their "complicity" in systems of domination is to be "exposed," and their authors are to be "revealed" as insufficiently radical at best, partisans of the patriarchal capitalist order at worst. The term *aesthetic* must now be placed within quotation marks lest the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

writer seem retrograde. "The chief disabling characteristic of recent criticism," writes Fromm, "the practice that most consistently alienates the reader from any possibility of emotional union with the work, is the assumption that it is the sophisticated critic's task *not to heed the voice of the author.* To heed it . . . is to be turned into swine by the charms of Circe."

In four central chapters on the Woolfs and Brontës, Fromm shows how the rejection of the idea of literary value has given rise to historical and biographical distortions and to bad teaching. The lives and works of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, for example, have been re-evaluated along capricious, modish lines in order to serve the ideology of academic feminist critics. Similarly, Virginia Woolf has suffered so much at the hands of radical doctrinaires that her private conduct and one brief piece of nonfiction, *A Room of One's Own*, loom larger in the academy than her greatest works of imagination—*Between the Acts*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse.*

In some respects, Fromm's book is a meticulous and focused response to Russell Jacoby's influential polemic *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, a book which he treats more intelligently than any other critic or scholar this reader has encountered. On the one hand, Fromm is less committed than Jacoby to arguments popularly associated with the Left; but as he makes clear in his discussion of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on African-American literary theory, he is prepared to be persuaded. On the other hand, Fromm is considerably more respectful than Jacoby of the building of scholarly knowledge through academic research. He repeatedly insists that deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, and African-American studies have brought "valuable insights and techniques"; he never pines for a return to the New Criticism; and he believes previous generations of critics were guilty of putting certain literary works—he mentions *Hamlet*, "Tintern Abbey," and *Dubliners*—on a pedestal. He seems in fact to yearn for both a broadened, more accessible literary scholarship and a deeply principled, less careerist radicalism than colleges and universities are currently providing to the culture at large: the "Academic Revolutionary," he writes, "is not just an oxymoron but an ultimate betrayer of authentic ideals."

Fromm's critics might accuse him of indulging in *ad hominem* attacks, as when he chides Professor Gates for driving a Mercedes-Benz. This remark does seem peevish, especially when Fromm might have pointed to such appalling English-department practices as the exploitation of part-time instructors (mostly female) whose penury ultimately pays for those seminars on feminist critique, marginalization, the political unconscious, and so on. But all this is not to say that well-considered *ad hominem* arguments have no place. Although labeled fallacies in college handbooks, inquiries into the character and conduct of speakers sometimes *do* help us weigh the value of their arguments. Fromm is certainly right that entrepreneurial behavior does not square with anticapitalist pronouncements, and that calls for transforming the social order are passing strange when heard from professors at elite schools. For the comfortably tenured Left, it seems that the personal does not become political after all.

Shorter notices

Eric Foner & John A. Garraty, editors
The Reader's Companion to
American History.
Houghton Mifflin, 1,226 pages, $35

The editors of the present volume, both of Columbia University, offer this encyclopedia as "a book to be read for enjoyment and —like the famous encyclopedia of the eighteenth-century philosophes—for enlightenment." Both pleasure and instruction are likely to come, for the editors—and the Society of American Historians, which sponsored it—are devoted to "the writing of history as literature" and make no apologies for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

addressing a general audience of literate readers in a style that, on the whole, will cause no pain.

But given the sheer heft of the book, you won't be able to read it in bed, the volume resting comfortably on your chest. This massive compendium is both a reference work, for the occasional tracking down of facts, and a collection of essays (some of them quite long) on virtually every aspect of American history. The list of some four hundred contributors, experts in their several fields, is indeed distinguished—Martin J. Marty on religion, Dee Brown on Indians, Hilton Kramer on modern painting and sculpture, Alan Brinkley on the New Deal. And the book's system of cross-referencing, its bibliographies, and its index will earn the gratitude of every reader.

Short pieces of about one thousand words ("Erie Canal," "Pony Express") are interspersed with longer essays on such subjects as "Labor," "Revolution," "Suffrage," and "Urbanization." Moreover, some four hundred entries are devoted to American biography—Jack London, Sandra Day O'Connor, I. M. Pei, Aaron Copland—and all the presidents ("even," the editors remark, "Millard Fillmore"). In this category the book makes "a special effort to include women and members of minority groups," largely on the ground that they have been neglected in the past or are in the news now. Hence we have Gloria Steinem alongside Benjamin Franklin, Madame C. J. Walker (who made a fortune on her hair-straightener for blacks) alongside Geronimo and Jackie Robinson. The editors make a claim for the importance of each of their biographies, but I am at a loss to understand why the seemingly obligatory Alice Walker didn't make it, or Bill Gates, whose Microsoft products such as MS-DOS have revolutionized modern communications.

The system of cross-referencing will also enlarge the reader's understanding of the important subjects covered herein. The entry on "Abortion," for example, steers the reader to entries on "Birth Control" and "*Roe v. Wade*," and these, in turn, lead on to "Family," "Feminist Movement," "Emma Goldman," "Margaret Sanger," and "*Griswold v. Connecticut*," which lead to "Seneca Falls Convention," "Suffrage," "Divorce," and "Constitution." I had expected to find the usual politically correct viewpoints, but most of the essays are remarkably even-handed and reasonably objective in treatment. However, it must be said that on some occasions predictable dubieties are in fact voiced—as when David Healy, in "Caribbean-U.S. Relations," describes the Nicaraguan Contra war against the Sandinistas as the act of "a new CIA-created army," or when, in "Mario Cuomo," Robert S. McElvaine opines that, "at the very peak of Reaganism," Cuomo's speech about family values at the 1984 Democratic Convention "brought tears to the eyes of even cynical politicians." In fact, a check of Reagan entries in the index will show that most of our historians here are unusually disgruntled Democrats. Even so, this is a very valuable reference work to own and, given its size, it is well worth the price. It is no wonder that it has been chosen as a Main Selection of both the Book-of-the-Month Club and the History Book Club.

—*James W. Tuttleton*

John Matthias Reading Old Friends: Essays, Reviews, and Poems on Poetics, 1975-1990. State University of New York Press, 348 pages, $49.50; $16.95 paper

"Topophilia," wrote Auden, himself a poet particularly attuned to landscapes, "differs from the farmer's love of his home soil and the litterateur's fussy regional patriotism in that it is not possessive or limited to any one locality." The poet John Matthias, a consummate topophile, has, over the past two decades, put down roots in English soil as deep as those that bind him to his native American Midwest. His affinity for historical, cultural, and natural landscapes of England is complemented by an exceptional sensitivity for the most subtle rhythms and tones of British poetry. In *Reading Old*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Friends, Matthias turns his firmly grounded poetic intelligence to a wide range of English and American poets and critics, as well as to Turner, Constable, Britten, and the historian Francis Parkman.

Matthias charts his development as a poet in the two most personal essays in this collection, "Places and Poems" and "Poetry of Place." He describes how he learned to "take the measure of [a] place and find [his] proper station in it" by opening himself to the "full geological, topographical, natural, historical, and social context" of the region. He quotes liberally from his own poetry, demonstrating the gradual change in poetic voice from that of an anxious outsider to that of a poet "at home in the world." In the process, Matthias deepened his understanding of poets whose work was inspired by the spirit of place, even one as foreign to his Poundian sensibility as Wordsworth.

Matthias's best essays are on poets whose primary material is drawn from a particular region and its history, most notably George Crabbe, David Jones, Geoffrey Hill, the early Auden, Wendell Berry, Jeremy Hooker, and Eaven Boland. This is not to say that considerations of content dominate his critical approach. Technique and the discipline of craft form the major, if implicit, criteria of his criticism.

For many years Matthias has devoted himself to introducing poets from the United Kingdom to American readers. The essays drawn from "Not For Sale in USA," his column in *Another Chicago Magazine*, are indispensable to anyone seeking a glimpse beyond the towering figures—Dylan Thomas, Hugh MacDiarmid, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, et al.—that dominate America's view of contemporary poetry from Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and England. Furthermore, Matthias uses these essays as an opportunity to examine the politics of language in poetry where language, be it Scots, Lallans, Welsh, or Gaelic, is the last bastion of a disappearing culture.

There is some overlap in this collection and, occasionally, some bewilderingly complex writing. Nonetheless, it is interesting to watch Matthias test an idea by setting it in different contexts. And his attempts to spin out several threads of an argument at once do reveal unexpected patterns. In the title essay, for example, Matthias's more or less successful attempt to discover common ground among three disparate books gives rise to an intriguing meditation on finding echoes of past conversations in his friends' works of art.

David Jones wrote that a poet "must work within the limits of his love," and in these essays Matthias is well within those limits. The enthusiasm and depth of feeling in this volume are genuine; he brings a finely tuned ear, capacious learning, and a generous spirit to the work of his contemporaries. Along with lively criticism, *Reading Old Friends* provides rare insight into the workings of a passionate and committed poetic imagination.

—*Tess Lewis*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notebook

Carlos Fuentes discovers America

by Mark Falcoff

One of the more substantial cultural offerings to celebrate the quincentennial of Columbus's discovery of America will be broadcast on the Discovery Channel on April 19-23. Entitled "The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World," it is a series of five one-hour programs on the history of Spain and Spanish-America, written and narrated by the celebrated Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes. The series embraces an extraordinarily wide range of materials, from the pre-Columbian Indian civilizations to Mexican immigrants in today's Los Angeles, from Spain's Gothic age to its current "consumer socialism." The underlying premises of the series are 1) that the events of 1492 really did inaugurate a New World, and 2) that the history of America (broadly construed as the entire Western hemisphere) has been a long search for Utopia, a quest which has been vastly enriching to humanity as a whole.

A generation ago such notions would have been wholly unexceptionable. But today, when the Columbus quincentennial celebrations are being forced to assume some heavy political burdens, it is a positive relief to see and hear the story of the discovery and conquest of the Americas told with a sense of balance, discrimination, and wit. If the scholarship here is somewhat conventional, at least it does not insist on judging the past purely in terms of the present. Although he is a man of passionate conviction, Fuentes the novelist is nonetheless capable of imagining perspectives other than his own, which is after all the first requirement of a successful historian.

The format of these programs is reminiscent of Sir Kenneth Clark's justly famous *Civilisation* series. We are taken on a historical and geographical tour, with the same guide periodically popping out of the cloisters or pacing in front of towers and tapestries. Fuentes's English is excellent, and although he is reciting a script, the delivery is more fluent and more reassuring than we might get from many native speakers. Moreover, the sites, both in Spain and in Latin America, are well selected, and the photography is excellent. Like *Civilisation*, too, there is a book to accompany the series, though in this case the text goes far beyond the television scripts.[1] This allows Fuentes to develop some of the themes at greater length. Unfortunately, it also occasionally encourages him to abandon some of his courtesy and restraint.

The first program ("The Virgin and the Bull") covers Spanish history from its origins to 1492. Particular emphasis is given to the Gothic and Moorish periods, and (with the addition of Jewish settlement) to the emergence of what Fuentes calls a "tricultural" society. The second program ("The Conflict of the Gods") deals with the

1 *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World*, by Carlos Fuentes; Houghton Mifflin, 400 pages, $35.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

major Indian civilizations of the Americas —the Aztecs and the Incas—as well as with their conquest by a hardy, courageous band of Spanish soldiers. The third program ("Children of La Mancha") deftly summarizes the entire three centuries of Latin America's colonial period. The fourth ("The Price of Freedom") takes us from the wars of independence to the end of the nineteenth century. The fifth and final program ("Unfinished Business") brings the story up to date, but in many ways is as much about the United States as it is about Spain or Latin America.

Of the many observations one might make about this series, two in particular seem appropriate. In the first place, it demonstrates the degree to which the old historic grudge between Mexico and Spain has been attenuated. There was a time—and it was not so long ago—when no Mexican writer of any stature, and certainly none advertising himself as left of center, would have anything good at all to say about the Mother Country. True, the programs were partly underwritten by a group of Spanish banks and businesses. But that is not the point here. Now that Spain is socialist (at least in name), it has become politically respectable. And with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it remains the only alternative pole of attraction for Mexicans (and other Latins) who would wish to be freer of U.S. cultural influence.

In the second place, these films reveal just how much of a *U.S.*—as distinct from a Mexican—cultural icon Carlos Fuentes has become. Of course, he is, and deserves to be, a major figure of Mexican and Latin American letters. But throughout "The Buried Mirror," he reveals how intense his exposure has been not merely to our language and our way of life but also to our political and cultural sensibility—one might even say, to our political and cultural pieties. The text of his commentary is not merely written in an American version of English. Virtually all the metaphors he employs can have resonance only for an American audience. Even his cheap shots against the United States (most of which he saves for his book) are of the sort that would draw applause mostly from what might be called Jimmy Carter's America.

All in all, one would prefer to say nothing but good things about this series, since it is so much better than what normally passes for educational television in this country. And make no mistake about it, there is much good to say. The discussion of pre-Columbian civilizations is serious—respectful but unsentimental—as is the coverage of classical Spanish civilization. The ambivalent nature of the conquest is emphasized, as is the fact that it was *Spaniards* who first raised the issue of the rights of the vanquished. At the same time, Fuentes shows how a genuinely syncretic "Latin American" culture emerged in the seventeenth century. Along the way he provides vivid sketches of some of the principal personalities in both Spain and Spanish-America: not just Cortés and Moctezuma, but Las Casas, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and also Goya, Velázquez, and Miguel de Cervantes. (When was the last time you heard *these* people seriously discussed on television?) The coverage of the Spanish-American wars of independence and their aftermath is done with a sure grasp of the major themes. Fuentes conveys crisply and precisely how and why these countries were not ready for independence, and the way their development models in the late nineteenth century led to social explosions—particularly the Mexican Revolution of 1910. (The latter, by the way, is illustrated by some remarkable archival footage.)

Somewhat less satisfactory, however, is the conclusion of the series ("Unfinished Business"), which advances a number of highly tendentious points about U.S.-Latin American relations. We are left unclear about exactly what Fuentes thinks is the obligation of the United States to these countries. Is it to pay their debts? To accept all of their unemployed? To become a Latin American country in its own right? Or is it just to feel guilty and have a good long cry?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It is here that the project's principal deficiency is suddenly thrust into sharp relief. The films (and, even more, the book) suffer from a kind of double standard with respect to Spain and the United States. For Spain, we are offered history, which ultimately understands and absolves; for the United States, we are offered sociology and economics, which judges and condemns. The double standard applies as well to both sides of the Rio Grande: for the Latins, the order of the day is sovereignty and dignity; for the gringos, it is openness and vulnerability.

Consider this: the final installment starts with Mexican illegals trying to cross the "cactus curtain" on the U.S. border while redneck immigration officers use helicopters, searchlights, and other paraphernalia to prevent their passage. The scenes are traumatic and at times even heart-wrenching. But they could hardly be regarded as seriously addressing the underlying issues. Fuentes airily dismisses the U.S. concern for secure borders, as he does a desire to maintain our own language and culture: the very same things he claims for Mexico and for Mexican-Americans in the United States. (At the same time, however, he proceeds to confirm our worst fears. The American Southwest was "always" Mexican, much in the way that Alsace-Lorraine was "always" French; we might as well just open our borders and let it happen.[2]) Of course, this is not *exactly* what Fuentes says. But his presentation invites a casual viewer to infer it. The text of the program itself more nearly emphasizes that we are *all* immigrants in the Americas, even the Indians (who came here from Asia across the Bering Strait); ergo, nobody has the right to exclude anybody, and the more polycultural a society, the stronger and more creative it is. Meanwhile, a number of important questions go begging. If, as Fuentes says, the U.S. economy positively requires an unlimited supply of Latin migrant laborers, why, then, do we have an immigration service at all? If their culture is the most important thing which Latins possess, why is the same not true for the apprehensive "Anglos"? If not, why not? If so, then where does that leave the United States, or for that matter France or Germany, all of whom are now faced with increasing numbers of migrants from what used to be called the Third World?

Fuentes uses the illegal aliens as pawns in a game which the United States cannot win no matter what it does. If it admits them, it is exploiting them; if it does not, it is inhumane, condemning them to starvation. Just what obligations *Mexico* might have to its own people is something he does not dwell upon. (Nor does he consider the obligations of the Mexican governments he has supported in the past, one of which he was pleased to represent as ambassador to France.) Rather than being a society in its own right, with responsibilities and difficult choices, "Mexico" (and, by extension, "Latin America") is reified into the eternal victim from whom nothing need be asked. Perhaps this, not "trickle-down" economics or Yankee imperialism, is the real cause of its comparative weakness and backwardness?

Much has happened in Latin America since these films went into production. Many of the anti-U.S. notions that inform the final installment are positively *démodé*—at least in Latin America, if not in certain venues in the United States. There must have been some furious reworking of the script toward the end, since there is a kind of muffled discussion of the new trends toward democracy and political participation, even though Fuentes himself prefers to finesse altogether the current move toward more open economic systems. These he is convinced do not and cannot work—at least in Latin

2 One of the more fraudulent scenes in the series takes us to a class in some school in the Southwest. The teacher repeats the lesson, paragraph by paragraph, in perfect English and perfect Spanish—*à la canadienne*. Possibly the scene is accurate and was not merely staged for cameras, but it is certainly not very typical of what passes for "bilingual" education in this country, which is usually nothing more than an excuse for schools to produce students illiterate in two languages instead of just one.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

America. ("Ha[ve] we not the tradition," he asks in the final passages of the book, "the information, the organization, and the intellectual capacities to create our own models of development, truly consonant with what we ha[ve] been, what we were, and what we want to be?") Will there be a "Latin American" economics, much like "Arab" or "African" socialism? Is one even needed? A somewhat different reading of Fuentes's series might suggest another outcome. Bracketed between Spain in its past and the United States in its present, Latin America may be headed for a "Western" future—one far happier and more secure than any it has ever known. That has implications for the United States, and for the current conflict over "multicultural" education, though perhaps not exactly the implications that Fuentes and the makers of this series had in mind.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Rabelais today *by D. S. Carne-Ross*
Courbet in his letters *by Karen Wilkin*
Toni Morrison *by Bruce Bawer*
The New York of Dawn Powell *by Lauren Weiner*
Archibald MacLeish *by Jeffrey Meyers*
Diderot's puzzles *by Renee Winegarten*
Aulis Sallinen's "Kullervo" in L.A. *by John Simon*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

M A L R A U X

© Karsh

Available again, three classics by André Malraux

THE CONQUERORS

Translated by Stephen Becker
New Foreword by Herbert R. Lottman
Based on his experiences in China as a young man, Malraux's second novel describes the struggle between the Kuomintang and the Communists during the revolution of the 1920s. It's both an exciting war story and a gallery of intellectual portraits: a ruthless Bolshevik revolutionary, a disillusioned master of propaganda, a powerful Chinese pacifist, and a young anarchist. "A valuable introduction to Malraux."—*Choice* $10.95 paper

MALRAUX, THE ABSOLUTE AGNOSTIC

Or, Metamorphosis as Universal Law
Claude Tannery
Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan
"An eloquent and thorough discussion of Malraux's central philosophy of life and art, as revealed by his fiction and other writings. Tannery is a fine interpreter of Malraux's thought, sensitive to the central issues of his work, always going unerringly to key episodes and key problems, and successfully demonstrating how Malraux's thought has been culturally, politically, and metaphysically nourished."
—Victor Brombert $37.50 cloth

THE WALNUT TREES OF ALTENBURG

Translated by A. W. Fielding
New Foreword by Conor Cruise O'Brien
This, Malraux's last novel—part of a longer work destroyed by the Gestapo—contains vivid scenes from both World Wars that reflect his enduring vision of human frailty and strength. "[Its] pages must be counted among the most haunted in all of twentieth century literature."—Victor Brombert $11.95 paper

THE TEMPTATION OF THE WEST

Translated by Robert Hollander
New Foreword by Jonathan D. Spence
Cast as an exchange of letters between a young Chinese man visiting Europe and a young Frenchman traveling in China, this novel-like meditation questions the impact of two contrasting cultures upon one another. "Sixty years after its publication, it maintains a relevance to current events that is astonishing."—Claude Tannery $10.95 paper

At bookstores or, for MC/VISA orders, call:
1-800-621-2736. In Illinois: 312-568-1550

1891-1991
A CENTURY OF FINE PUBLISHING
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dolan/Maxwell

Philadelphia

Distinguished Contemporary and Modern Works on Paper

Norman Ackroyd
Milton Avery
Morris Blackburn
Dean Dass
Carroll Dunham
Mary Beth Edelson
Claes Eklundh
Eric Fischl
Bill Freeland
Sam Gilliam
Anthony-Petr Górny
Stanley William Hayter
Joseph Hecht
David Hockney
Jane Kent
Robert Keyser
Winifred Lutz
Michael Manzavrakos
Mick Moon
Robert Motherwell
Elizabeth Murray
John Newman
Ben Nicholson
Wally Reinhardt
Nigel Rolfe
Susan Rothenberg
David Shapiro
Steven Sorman
Robert Stackhouse
Frank Stella
Stephen Talasnik
Claire Van Vliet
Terry Winters

BY APPOINTMENT

PHONE: 215, 732.7787 FAX: 215, 790.1866

CECILE GRAY BAZELON

"Cecile Gray Bazelon Doubled" 1991, oil on canvas, 50" × 50"

April 11–May 6, 1992

New Paintings
Central Park Series

KATHARINA RICH PERLOW GALLERY
Contemporary Paintings & Sculpture
560 Broadway, New York, NY 10012 • 212/941-1220

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Maurice English Poetry Award

Judge: 1991 Award
Thomas Kinsella

1990 Recipient: Jean Valentine
Judge: Robert Hass
1989 Recipient: W.S. Merwin
Judge: Peter Viereck
1988 Recipient: David Ray
Judge: Denise Levertov

1987 Recipient: Philip Booth
Judge: Maxine Kumin
1986 Recipient: Linda Pastan
Judge: William Stafford
1985 Recipient: Jane Cooper
Judge: Galway Kinnell

This award is presented annually to an author in his or her sixth (or beyond) decade of life for a distinguished book of poems published during the preceding calendar year. It responds to the fact that a body of work by Maurice English did not appear in book form until his 55th year. The Maurice English Poetry Award carries an honorarium of $1000 and a request for a public reading in Philadelphia. It is given in tribute to his work by his family.

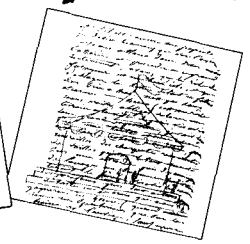
Please forward books to:
Maurice English Poetry Award
2222 Rittenhouse Square
Philadelphia, PA 19103-5505

1992 Award: Deadline, April 15, 1992
Judge to be announced.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The man and artist who emerges in these pages is a deeply fascinating figure, altogether different from the incorrigible provincial of legend."—Michael Fried, author of *Courbet's Realism*

LETTERS OF *Gustave Courbet*



Edited and translated by
Petra ten-Doesschate Chu

The leading French Realist painter, Gustave Courbet (1819–77), was a prolific writer who corresponded with such luminaries as Baudelaire, Monet, Hugo, and Proudhon. This brilliantly annotated collection of his letters—many never before published or translated—provides an unparalleled view of Courbet's life, as well as a fascinating look at his cultural and intellectual milieu.

768 pages. $55.00 at bookstores, or, for MC/VISA orders, call: 1-800-621-2736. Illinois: 312-568-1550

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

THE FINEST NEW POETRY. . .

Moon Crossing Bridge
Tess Gallagher
"These poems are a gift of a poet's heart and soul to her readers"
—*Robert Coles* $17.00 cloth

As If It Matters
Eamon Grennan
"Some of his most telling work, and with so fine a poet that is saying a great deal" —*W.S. Merwin*
$19.00 cloth, $11.00 paper

. . .FROM GRAYWOLF PRESS

2402 University Ave. Ste. 203, St. Paul, MN 55114
Distributed to the trade by Consortium (800) 283-3572

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THERE'S A PLACE IN THIS WORLD FOR UNUSUAL PEOPLE.

ADELPHI.

Approximately 12.6 million high school seniors will be applying to college this year.

Approximately six or seven hundred of them look at this magazine every now and then.

Approximately fifty or sixty check out the ads.

And maybe four or five, at best, bother reading them.

Congratulations. You're part of that last group. This is an ad for you.

Being significantly different from the average American high school student, perhaps you'll be interested in a significantly different university:

A school that questions the value of a typical 20th century college education as much as you probably do, and a school that attempts to provide answers to your questions with questions of its own.

And a school whose ads, instead of blathering on and on, simply invite you to learn more by calling the number below.

We sincerely hope all four or five of you flood us with replies.

ADELPHI UNIVERSITY For more information call 1-800-ADELPHI.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BILL JENSEN

Works on Paper

April 2 - May 9

Gallery II

Landscape Drawings by Myron Stout

WASHBURN GALLERY

41 East 57th Street New York 10022

(212) 753 - 0546 Fax 935 - 7697

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

Second Class Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED